

The Index Decision: An Overview of the Process and the Practice of Indexing

By Larry D. Sweazy

It has been noted by many booksellers that the first action a potential nonfiction book buyer takes, after picking up the book in the first place, is to open it—and look at the index.

A good index can make or break a relationship with the potential reader. Librarians will also judge a book by the index, as will educators. So if the index is so important, then why is its creation, use, and production, such a mystery?

First, a bit of history and definition before that question can be answered.

According to the ASI (American Society of Indexing) an index is defined by the British indexing standard (BS3700:1988) this way: “An index is a systematic arrangement of entries designed to enable users to locate information in a document.”

That sounds simple enough. But a good index is anything but simple. In *Books Ireland* (February 1994), an index is described this way: “Indexes are among those necessary but never spectacular products of hard as well as skilled work that can sometimes make the difference between a book and a good book.”

An index is not just a list of names, places, and events. That would be a concordance. An index is far more than a list noted with page references. It provides answers to a reader’s question. It provides an access point into the text, pinpointing the exact location of the information being sought out. And more than anything, the index provides a conceptual map (or skeleton) of the book, as well as providing exact details like names, cities, or events.

Indexes in history can be traced back to Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), and probably farther back in history to the ancient Greeks, but didn’t really settle into an accepted form until after Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1400s. Indexing a scroll had its challenges, but information retrieval was on an evolutionary path from nearly the first instance of the written word. Alphabetization rules evolved in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and the style of indexes we use today grew out of those hard and fast rules.

Even in today’s fast-paced, computer-driven world, the index continues to be used and evolve. Information retrieval is a primary act of every day existence, and the index is a common, often overlooked tool, that is generally under-utilized and under-appreciated.

Once a book has been accepted for publication, an author is often given the choice of indexing his or her work on their own, or hiring the work out to a freelance indexer. At that point the author has a crucial decision to make, learning a new craft in a short amount of time—and creating an index that is acceptable to the publisher, possibly to the academic and scholarly society at large, and to the reader—or entrusting a freelancer with his book. That freelancer must be paid a decent wage, usually before royalties are ever received by the author.

Each choice has its pros and cons,

and there is not a right choice that fits all circumstances. In the following sections, I will try to address the advantages and disadvantages of writing one’s own index or hiring it out, and how to navigate both situations in the most professional way possible.

Writing Your Own Index

Your book is finished, and has been delivered to the publisher. You’ve gone through the copy-editing and proof-reading processes, and your editor sends you a note (or e-mail) stating that the page proofs are in the mail, and the index needs to be written and returned in two weeks. A good editor will give you an idea of when to expect this, so the schedule and notification of the index process should not come as a surprise. But sometimes it does.

So you have the page proofs, now what?

Since you’ve agreed to write the index, then hopefully, you have prepared yourself by familiarizing yourself with the indexing conventions your publisher has set forth in its guidelines.

Most publishers will base guidelines on a style manual, like by *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and use it as the firm set of indexing rules and guidelines. If you have not done so, the first thing you’ll need to do is read the indexing section of the style manual recommended by your publisher.

You will begin to figure out very quickly that indexing is a writing discipline in itself.

There are indented styles, run-on styles, *See* and *See also* conventions, alphabetization rules like word-by-word or letter-by-letter, and so on, that must be learned and put into practice.

The indexing section in *The Chicago Manual of Style* is over sixty pages long, and, like any other style manual, there are instances that will not apply to your work. But there are many that will, and a good editor will know by looking at your index if you understand the indexing process at the bare minimum—so the index will be as publishable as your nonfiction writing.

The publisher will also usually give you formatting information such as margins, double- or single-spacing requirements, as well as what type of electronic file to deliver.

Most of today's indexing tasks are done on the computer with software, and there are several programs that include reasonably sophisticated indexing features. The most common are Microsoft Word, Adobe FrameMaker, Quark, and InDesign.

Publishers will generally ask for a Word file, or a .rtf (rich-text) file, so it is important that the program you choose has the capability of being saved with a .doc or .rtf file extension.

There are also several software programs available that are designed especially for indexing. Cindex, Sky, and Macrex are the most popular, and all have different features, but produce an index in the necessary file types. All of these programs can be purchased for less than a thousand dollars—but they may not be advantageous to an author writing one or two indexes in their career. These programs are most often used by freelance indexers.

The days of using actual index cards for creating an index are long gone. Software speeds up the process dramatically. But like all software, there is a learning curve, and it will take time to get up to speed on the programs.

So, we have page proofs, a style manual, formatting instructions, and systems (computer software or otherwise) in place to create the index—now it's on to the fun part: writing the index itself.

The next step in the writing process is term selection, and it is extremely important. There's a lot more to it than picking out important subjects and listing them.

Again, we are creating an index not a concordance, and no, a computer program can't just list all of the keywords and have it pass as a usable index.

The index has to be written word by word, just like the book was.

The first thing an author must do—as they stare at that blank index

page—is realize that the index is not about them. It's about the reader. One of the greatest pitfalls of writing one's own index is the closeness to the material that all authors must possess to create a tangible work of nonfiction.

Everything in the book is important to the author, and therefore must be included in the index. That would be a false assumption. One that would lead to ruin, and an index so dense it would be of no use.

As an indexer, you are acting as an advocate for the reader...answering their questions by providing terms that might not even be in the text. Remember that term, conceptual map, I used early on? This is what I meant.

If there is an assassination in your text, wouldn't it also be considered a murder? You would then enter both terms as an entry—even if murder wasn't used as a description or event in the text.

Of course, the important names, places, and events would be included in an index. But...there has to be more information than a listing of page references—there should be sub-headings, and sub-sub-headings if necessary.

How many times have you seen an index entry like this while conducting research:

acacia trees, 14, 58, 70, 104, 156, 109-110, 110, 136, 147. *See also* trees

Wouldn't it be more useful to the readers for there to be an entry in the index like this instead:

acacia trees, 14, 156. *See also* trees; vegetation; charcoal production, 109-110; as crops, 110; distribution of, 58; as fuel wood, 70; leaves, 136; prohibitions on removing, 147; as sources of feed, 104

This type of entry and term selection offers the reader more specific information, saves them time, and gets them to the exact location, or access point, in the text they were looking for in the first place. The first example offers no specific information, and

each page reference must be looked up and searched. This is a poor indexing practice, and does not take the reader into consideration at all.

There are times when the publisher will dictate size, or a number of specific pages, to the index, and there may not be room for such detail. My first suggestion is to advocate for more pages. You don't get what you don't ask for. If pages can't be added, then try to write as detailed an index as you can, and avoid listing unspecified page ranges more than five times.

A good index is usually five percent of the text. Five pages of index for every one hundred pages of text, usually double column, but sometimes three column. If you get the font size from the publisher, you can calculate how many entries per page of text you'll need to write using this formula: number of lines in the index multiplied by the number of columns, multiplied by the total number of index pages, divided by the number of pages of text. It should look something like this:

45 lines x 2 columns x 10 = 900 entries. Now divide 900 by 200 (assumed number of text pages), and you'll need 4.5 index entries per page.

This formula will help narrow down what is important and what is not—so that thick, unusable index is truly a usable one. Using a *See* reference will help restrain the number of entries, if that is necessary, due to page limitations.

One thing about *See Also* references to keep in mind if you use them, they shouldn't create a circle for the reader. In other words, there shouldn't be references like this:

acacia trees. *See also* trees
trees. *See also* acacia trees

You are sending the reader one place, then back to another, then back to the original access point.

Obviously, there is much more to

writing a good index, but the key things to keep in mind are reader advocacy, term selection, specificity of terms (use of sub and sub-sub headings), brevity, and clarity of *See/See also* references.

The index is a tool for the reader that reflects directly on the writer, and it should have the same intensity, the same insistence of quality that was placed in the text in the first place, otherwise the author is letting the reader down, as well as his own work.

Hiring An Indexer

Do I really need an index? The publisher will probably dictate that decision, but if the author has a choice, it is my opinion that all nonfiction works need an index.

Why? Very simply, nearly all nonfiction can be read in a non-linear fashion, may be used as reference material, and should serve the reader at all possible levels. A book lacking an index, no matter how well-written, is lacking an important component in serving its audience.

So, it has been decided that the author will not write the index, where are freelancer indexers found, what do they cost, and are there professional standards that must be followed?

First things first, finding an indexer is not as hard as one might think.

Most publishers have a list of freelance indexers that they have worked with in the past that have the necessary credentials and experience to serve an author's needs. If the publisher has no freelance indexers that it is willing to refer, then the first place I would suggest the author look is The American Society of Indexing (ASI).

The ASI web site (*See resources*) offers a great amount of information, including the Indexer Locator. If an indexer is not found there, then there are many listed on the Internet. Google freelance indexers and you'll find more than you're looking for.

Another way to find an indexer is through colleagues.

Writers often work together, or see each other at conventions or in social

situations. Don't hesitate to ask fellow writers if they have any experience with freelance indexers. Most indexers do not advertise; they survive on word-of-mouth and their reputation.

Indexers tend to specialize, and are listed by discipline in The Indexer Locator, as well as by name. It may surprise you to learn that there are people who just write indexes for cookbooks, or technical books, or scholarly books. A person who specializes in cookbooks would not be a good choice to write the index for a biography on Abraham Lincoln.

There are no required standards for becoming an indexer.

There are library science courses devoted to indexing offered at many respected colleges, a certification course is offered by ASI, and an indexing course is also offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The USDA has offered education courses for seventy-five years, and is highly respected. The indexing course was created to provide a second stream of income to farmers and their spouses, but has also become a resource to those seeking to work at home.

Once an indexer who specializes in the particular subject has been found, it would behoove the author to ask for references, check the references thoroughly, and ask for a work sample.

Rates usually range from \$3 a page to \$5 a page, depending on the depth of the desired index, the length, and the deadline. A 200 page manuscript will typically range between \$600 and \$1,000. Most freelance indexers will require half of the payment up front, and the rest on delivery of the index, when working with a new client.

A contract is not necessary, and most indexers operate on a gentleman's agreement. But if it would make the author feel more comfortable, there are examples of contracts on the ASI web site.

Since the indexer is essentially a work-for-hire proposition, the indexer retains the copyright to the index until

the indexer has been paid in full, and the rights are then turned over to the author. If an indexer is not paid, they have legal recourse they can pursue not only through the author, but also through the publisher if the book has been published. A lawsuit from a freelancer could have dire consequences on an author's relationship with their publisher. If you hire a freelancer, make sure they can be paid in full.

It is extremely important that the freelance indexer is given an accurate deadline, and the publisher will often work directly with the indexer once the author has made the hire.

Some things to consider when hiring a freelancer:

You want someone who has the experience to decipher the book's text, and create a navigable index, one who understands conceptual maps, and the responsibility of appealing to the reader when she first picks up the book. Many freelance indexers have been indexing for a number of years. Make sure their experience can be validated. It's your book on the shelf, but it is also the indexer's index. They should take as much pride in the published work as you do.

Education is important, but experience is just as important—if not more. Can the indexer hit deadlines? Is there a copy-edit needed? Have they proof-read their work?

Can they deliver the file to the publisher in the proper format? If the freelance indexers have worked with reputable publishers in the past, then they should be able to provide this information easily.

Whether an author writes his own index, or if he hires out the work, he is ultimately responsible to readers (and publishers) for the quality of the index.

It is entirely possible that an author can write a great index, just as it is possible that a freelance indexer can fail at the task. Much care must be taken with such an important component of the book, and ultimately, of the reader's

experience. There are many things to consider in making the indexing decision, and I would appeal to all authors that they take the proper amount of time and research in that consideration. I hope the information provided here will make that decision a little easier.

Resources

American Society of Indexers (www.asindexing.org)
USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) graduate indexing courses ([www.http://www.grad.usda.gov](http://www.grad.usda.gov))
Microsoft Word (www.microsoft.com)
Adobe FrameMaker (www.adobe.com)
Quark (www.quark.com)
InDesign (www.adobe.com/products/indesign/)
CINDEX (www.indexres.com)
Sky (www.sky-software.com)
Macrex (www.macrex.com)

Books

The Chicago Manual of Style (<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org>)
Indexing Books, 2E, Nancy Mulvany (Chicago Guides to Writing and Publishing)
The Art of Indexing, Larry S. Bonura (Wiley)
Indexing A to Z, Hans H. Wellisch (Niso Press)

Larry D. Sweazy (www.larrydsweazy.com) won the WWA Spur award for Best Short Fiction in 2005, and was nominated for a Derringer award in 2007. His other short stories have appeared in, or will appear in, *The Adventure of the Missing Detective: And 25 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories!*, *Boy's Life*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Amazon Shorts*, and other publications. His first novel, *The Rattlesnake Season*, will be published by Berkley in the fall of 2009. Larry is also the owner of *WordWise Publishing Services, LLC*, and as a freelance indexer he has written over 550 back-of-the-book indexes for publishers such as *Cisco Press*, *Addison-Wesley*, *O'Reilly*, and *Thomson-Gale*. He lives in *Noblesville, Indiana*, with his wife, *Rose*, two dogs, and a cat.

FAST DRAW (from page 8)

find out that Martsen wants him to murder Aborigines at long distances on his vast ranch. The American is understandably outraged and turns down the job offer by punching the rancher through the doors of his own house.

The war is on then. Martsen and his minions unsuccessfully try to eliminate the Yank. They pursue Quigley across the territory like an outlaw, but he proves a tough prey. He picks off all but two of Martsen's men with his 1874 Sharps Buffalo rifle, until he is finally brought down with a bullet in his leg. His enemies tie him and drag him across a considerable portion of the Australian outback to Martsen's ranch.

The rancher could kill him outright, but decides to have a little fun in the process. Since he is a gunfighter enthusiast, he has his men stand Quigley in front of his pistol target and cut his bonds. Martsen wears one of his prized set of Colts. He instructs his men to lay Quigley's rifle at the American's feet, but then thinks better of it. He has seen what damage Quigley can do with his long gun, and seems to remember that Quigley admitted that he was not too familiar with revolvers. He tosses the rifle away and tucks the other of his Colts in Quigley's belt. He intends to give the American a lesson in the art of the fast draw. Martsen's two surviving men take positions to his right and left. All three face Quigley. The rancher clearly savors the moment, lamenting how he had been born on the wrong continent. He is sure that he could have made a name for himself as a Western gunfighter. Quigley then provides the igniter, "This ain't Dodge City. And you ain't Bill Hickok."

Martsen draws but Quigley is so blindingly fast that he mortally wounds the rancher and kills his two men before any of them can get off a shot.

Great Misunderstanding: Martsen had enthused to Quigley, earlier in the film, about his matched Colts. Quigley admitted that he never had much use for one, which is why the rancher decided to arm the American with one of his pistols, rather than the deadly rifle. Quigley walks over to his opponent after the shootout and explains, "I said I never had much use for one. Never said I didn't know how to use it." Even Martsen, with his life ebbing away on the ground, gets a little chuckle at this irony.

Tombstone (1993)

The Earps, Doc Holiday, the Clantons, the corral of all corrals – what more can one say? Due to the number of participants involved, some may argue that this is not exactly a small-scale shootout. However, the opposing sides in this match-up act almost as a group-man, at least until the bullets start flying. The gunfighters in the *Magnificent Seven* fought as individuals in their magnum opus, but the Earps and Doc clearly operate as a single entity on their four horseman of the Apocalypse walk to the daddy-of-all Western shootouts. For a fleeting moment it seems as if bloodshed might be avoided. The Earps and the Clantons obviously do not want to commence firing. But, besides their handguns the Earps have also brought a loose cannon to the showdown – Doc.

Lesson Learned: If someone winks, wink back. Who knows!

William Groneman III is a veteran of the New York City Fire Department. He has enjoyed fifteen years with the Western Writers of America, and has served as a member of the WWA Board.