

Does every book need an index?

We would say yes – unless it's likely to be read once and then discarded, like the latest airport novel. Certainly a non-fiction book without an index causes its readers considerable frustration.

'The absence of an index ... is surely a lamentable failure on the part of the publisher and one that will hamper its use.' (Reviewer's comment on a recent theology text)

What does a professional indexer do?

A professional indexer compiles an 'analytical' index – not just a list of keywords. There are no quick fixes for the kind of intellectual analysis required in order to produce the most efficient 'finding' and 'navigation' tool for a printed or electronic publication. An indexer considers the terms the readers are likely to use and relates them to the language chosen by the author. An indexer analyses the meaning and significance of the entire content in detail, and identifies tangible concepts from the woolliest of descriptions. An indexer knows, for example, that tigers aren't always tigers – they may also be referred to as 'big cats', 'endangered species', 'man-eaters', 'top predators', '*Panthera tigris*' and 'poaching targets'. And an indexer, unlike keyword-based systems, will ignore such phrases as 'unlike tigers' and distinguish between Sumatran and Siberian species.

A professionally trained indexer will therefore:

- Connect all the terms used by the author and all those likely to be sought by the reader with a web of cross-references so nothing is missed, no matter where the reader begins to search.
- Use subheadings to add levels of detail, making retrieval faster and more specific, and preventing readers from having to wade through long strings of page numbers to find what they want.
- Use qualifying notes to resolve ambiguities.
- Distinguish between material in footnotes, illustrations and tables.
- Make sure the index is clear, comprehensive and internally consistent.
- Tailor the index to fit the available space and conform to your house style.

But we don't need indexes ...

... because we get our authors to make their own

This can be bad news. Would you want your authors to design their own covers? Few authors have any indexing experience and most simply don't know how to create an effective index. Many think that computer-generated lists of keywords are just as good. And most are too close to their own words to anticipate their readers' needs – an author might refer to 'agricultural runoff' but readers may look up 'farm waste'. An experienced, objective third-party indexer knows what to look out for and will come up with efficient, neat solutions.

... because we make detailed contents lists

It's not easy to search for specific pieces of information in a detailed contents list and readers may often be faced with a wide page range to trawl through. Contents lists also rely on the author's own words, limiting the points of entry that a diverse readership needs, and cannot include all the rich digressions, comparisons, examples and anecdotal references that an index does. If you save space on the contents list, you can make more room for an index and your readers will thank you.

... because they take too long to compile

Not if you plan ahead. It only takes a few weeks at the end of a book's long production schedule, and some indexes can be turned round within days. It's even possible for the index to be almost completed before the last sections of the book are edited if embedded indexing techniques are used (and the text can be reformatted without having to alter the index).

Give your books added value with a professionally produced index.

... because our ebooks are fully searchable

This is a complete myth. Keyword-based retrieval systems pick out far too much information to be usable and far too little to be reliable. Only careful analysis creates suitable index terms in non-fiction ebooks – there are no shortcuts for extracting meaning and significance from the text, for identifying complex concepts, or for recognizing different ways of expressing similar ideas. Don't forget that index entries must be properly linked to the text when a printed book is converted into an ebook.

... because they cost too much

They cost no more than any other quality editorial service. Cutting the index may be a false economy. After all, books with indexes *sell*. Readers use them to compare books before they buy them, both in real bookstores and online with Amazon's *Look Inside* feature, and reviewers – the first readers of a new book – look more favourably on those that are well indexed. Readers frustrated by the lack of an index may avoid your imprint in future.

How do I find a professional indexer?

Look in the Society of Indexers' online directory – *Indexers Available* – for details of the experience, specialisms and contact details of hundreds of professional indexers. The Society runs a highly regarded training course and its membership grades reflect both training and experience, from Professional Member (MSocInd), through Advanced Professional (MSocInd(Adv)) to Fellow (FSocInd). You should search for an indexer with the right level of subject expertise. While most can deal with general-interest books, to do justice to highly specialized texts you need an indexer with at least as much knowledge as your intended readers.

What other services are available?

The Society's experts can advise authors and in-house editors on the finer points of commissioning an indexer. They can also provide training in basic indexing techniques on your premises, and corporate members can enrol staff on the online training course. The Society's website is regularly updated with useful information on all aspects of indexing.

How much does indexing cost?

As with other freelance editorial services, remuneration of indexers is by negotiation. The Society's recommended rates are based on the number of hours worked and the page or word count. For complex, highly specialized material or urgent deadlines, higher rates are appropriate. Remember, it's easy to produce something that *looks* like an index, but a cheap index is seldom a bargain.

How do I find out more?

Visit the Society's website www.indexers.org.uk or contact the office at admin@indexers.org.uk for more information about publications and services for authors and publishers.



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