

Indexing For Beginners

A 1000 word article

by

Joanne Phillips

Compiling an index is as easy as ABC once you've mastered the basic rules and conventions. Providing a comprehensive index for your readers gives your manuscript that professional edge.

Indexing is a complex and creative skill, and a good index should be a joy to use. There is no doubt the best person to compile an index is a professional indexer but there is nothing to stop authors from having a stab at indexing their own work.

With self-publishing increasingly prevalent, and more and more publishers expecting authors to provide an index for their book (usually at their own expense), it makes sense to get to grips with what makes a good index and to learn the skills needed to compile one.

Ann Kingdom, Marketing Director for the Society of Indexers, says: 'A great index is one that does its job unobtrusively, always taking you to just the right part of the book. Too often index users are frustrated – they know that what they are looking for must be somewhere in the book, but cannot track it down via the index.'

One of the problems with authors compiling their own indexes, Ann says, is that they are often too close to their texts to be able to put themselves in their reader's shoes. So this is the first hurdle to overcome – try to look at your book through fresh eyes, even if you have spent the last year writing the thing.

Who are your readers? You will have given this a lot of thought when planning the marketing strategy of your self-published book or writing the proposal for your publisher. Now use this information to get a vivid picture of the index user. What will they be looking for? How will they use the index? Are they likely to be complete novices searching for basic information or might your user be an expert themselves? Or will both types of reader be using your book?

With this in mind, carefully go through your text picking out the indexable elements. These may be names of places, people or organizations, abstract ideas and concepts, anything you feel will be something the reader is likely to want to look up. As you make your list note down where in the finished book this information appears, i.e. the page number. Take extra care to get this right – mistakes made with locations are extremely frustrating to the user.

The next stage is to organize this information into headings and subheadings. Here is an example of a heading with subheadings and locators:

agents 65-92

 agreements 89-90

 benefits of 66-8

 choosing 72

Note that the subheadings are indented and that every entry follows strict alphabetical and numerical order. Try to make main headings out of most of your entries, even if some of these also appear as subheadings under other main headings. Now look through your list for any possible cross-references.

Cross-references come in two types. The first is a ‘*see also* cross-reference’. This is used if you have a related term which is also useful and you would like to direct the reader there. For example:

conflict 71-2 *see also* crisis

The other type is a ‘*see* cross-reference’, where you direct the reader to a preferred term:

main character *see* lead

Take time to check and double check every entry and if possible get someone else to check it for usability, spelling, order and accuracy. Like the rest of your text, once it has gone to print it will be impossible to correct and (hopefully) your index will be around for a long time. Imagine the pleasure of knowing that your readers can find exactly what they are looking for and the enjoyment this will give them.

These are only the absolute basics which need to be mastered when compiling an index. There is, of course, a lot more to it and indexing as a profession has its own society and body of awards. As an extra skill for an author, indexing is a great choice and can be a useful way to keep the pounds rolling in while you’re waiting to be discovered. The Society of Indexers offer a home-study course and professional accreditation once qualified. Find out more at www.indexers.org.uk

So what are the most common mistakes made by beginners? According to Ann Kingdom they are: choosing headings no one would think of looking up, indexing passing mentions to subjects, sending readers on a wild goose chase from one heading to another, concentrating on proper names and failing to include concepts. A good tip is to study indexes in your own collection of books, particularly ones on a similar subject to yours. You will quickly see what makes a good index – and what makes for a useless one.

Now is your chance to have some fun and put your newfound knowledge to the test. Compile a short index of this article, approx 20 to 30 entries, and then compare it to the sample index over the page. Pretend each paragraph is a page

(starting from “Indexing is a complex...”) and number them accordingly. And remember – there is no strict right or wrong way to index, just what is useful and what isn’t.

Sample Index:

alphabetical order 7
Ann Kingdom *see* Kingdom, Ann
authors 4,10

beginners, tips for 11

common mistakes 6,11
cross-references 8

entries 7-9 *see also* indexable elements
examples 7,8

headings 7

index users *see* readers

indexable elements 6 *see also* entries

indexing

conventions and examples of 7-8
as a profession 10,11
skills for 6-9
Society of 3,10

Kingdom, Ann 3,4,11

locators 6,7

page numbers *see* locators
professional indexing 10,11
publishers 2,5

readers 5
needs of 3-5
types of 5

self-publishing 2,5
Society of Indexers 3,10
subheadings 7

writers *see* authors