

## What Is an Index?

The purpose of the index is to give the reader an informative, balanced portrait of what is in the book and a concise useful guide to all pertinent facts in the book. ... The usefulness of an index depends on the indexer's sense of relevance. An index should not be an indiscriminate list of everything mentioned in the book nor an overly complex work of scholarship; it should reflect the book's real emphases and should downplay or omit people and things mentioned only in passing or only as background.

— The MIT Press, *Indexing Guidelines*

[Indexing means] providing a comprehensive guide to the contents of a work and generally involving the following: (1) Reading page proofs of the equivalent to compile an alphabetical list of references to pertinent terms and concepts in the text; (2) Choosing, grouping, and consolidating page references under main headings, subheadings, and cross-references as a guide to specific information.

— Freelance Editorial Association, *Code of Fair Practice*

[An index is:] (1) an alphabetical listing of names, places, and topics along with the numbers or the pages on which they are mentioned or discussed. (2) a sequential arrangement of material, esp. in alphabetical or numerical order.

— *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*, 1992 edition

Indexes are among those necessary but never spectacular products of a hard—as well as skilled—work that can sometimes make the difference between a book and a good book.

— index review in *Books Ireland*, February 1994

The chief purpose of an index is distillation, and in performing that task it can manage to suggest a life's incongruities with a concision that the most powerful biographical stylist will have trouble matching.

— Thomas Mallon, *The New York Times*, 10 March 1991

The value of information lies in how it is organized. An index adds value that never existed in the original material.

— Neil Larson, software designer

Good indexers are amazing human beings, with intellectual wiring quite different from a good writer's. Their craft has an entire philosophy behind it, in many ways very close to math. I occasionally see posts from their mailing list, and I'm impressed with the complexity of their tasks and the level of thought that they bring to their jobs. Indexers also bring a reader-centered view to the use of the index, where a writer's indexing often follows the organization of the book.

— Frank Willison, editor-in-chief, O'Reilly & Associates