JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE DONE: A PUBLISHING PRIMER FOR AUTHORS

Last in a Series

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Your Index: Does It Help Sell Your Book?

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In the publishing process, as in the finished book, the index comes last. It cannot be created until pages have been made up and finalized--which, in textbooks with their many elements and illustrations, is no small task. By this time everyone, including the author, is (1) tired and (2) worried about the publication/adoption deadline. First-time authors who had acceded blithely to doing their own index now quail at the task they've undertaken--and, more often than not, seriously underestimated.

Before discussing content considerations, let's get two points out of the way. (1) Computers, specifically dedicated indexing programs (much faster than any word processor's built-in system), can take much of the brute work out of indexing. More than that they cannot do, and those who believe they can end up with long strings of undifferentiated page numbers (**locators**) that only infuriate users. (2) Although the author, who best knows the subject, might seem the ideal indexer, I believe an author's time is more profitably spent writing and that, moreover, the best possible index is most likely to be produced by an author and a professional indexer working together— about which more later.

This article concerns matters for the indexer's consideration, whoever the indexer is. A computer is incapable of considering them.

The Multifunction Textbook Index

At The Manuscript Doctors, my partner, Nancy Hopkins, and I index medical, nursing, and biosciences textbooks with a few forays into psychology--and some exceptions for TAA members. Even so, "textbook" is a broad term. In our case it encompasses such courses as Geology 101, anatomy and physiology for medical technicians, and biochemistry for premed students; texts for practicing physicians and surgeons; and research-oriented proceedings and compendiums addressed (as my indexing mentor put it) to "the three other people in the world who understand what the author is talking about."

The three-other-people texts present indexing challenges all their own, pertaining as they do to the topmost, tipmost branches of science where even the inhabitants cannot agree upon a language. We find that indexing these books helps alert us to what's hot in a science--useful for making indexes (and the books they represent) appear current and comprehensive. Here, however, I'll concentrate on indexes for garden-variety, shoulder-rounding, budget-breaking undergraduate and postgraduate college textbooks of 700 to 1200 pages produced by some 10 major publishers (anonymity maintained to protect everybody).

As index users, the textbook authors—perhaps as reviewers— have doubtless said:

● Is [the topic, any topic] in here?

● I know it's in here because I read it, but I can't find it.

● It's listed under **what**?

As index creators, you and we try to avoid these roadblocks by mentally projecting ourselves into the users' mindset. But which user? Novice student? Picky peer/adopter? Both? Or someone else entirely--say, a librarian. With textbooks, indexer empathy is triply tried, not only because textbooks are so large (try flipping through 1200 pages to find something) but because the index serves several purposes, not all of them obvious, and at least two levels of users, novice and expert.

Indexers not wholly conversant with the Textbook Marketing Game may view the index solely as a key to content. Even that use has several levels:

● Learning (students)

● Teaching (professors)

● Reference (both, plus library users

In the highly competitive marketing game, though, the index has to serve an additional function before the book can begin addressing users' needs: It has to help sell the book.

The Index as a Sales Tool

Textbooks are not marketed to the end users: students. They are marketed to adopters: your peers or their institutional committees.

Adopters care about such matters as comprehensiveness, organization, and timeliness. They judge these matters by the table of contents, of course, but also by the index. The table of contents is chronological; the index is alphabetical and, within that framework, topical. It is more detailed than the table of contents can be, and it groups everything about a subject together. For example, in a health care book, insurance matters may be scattered among "trauma" (in-hospital injuries), "hospital organization" (staff insurance), "malpractice," and perhaps "government programs," "Medicare/Medicaid," and even "FDA." All of these topics will be individually indexed, but insurance aspects will also be grouped under "insurance" or "third-party payment" with a cross-reference to the alternative term.

Some adopters are going to go by what one Las Vegas TAA presenter called the "nematode factor," or, "if your biology text doesn't discuss nematodes, forget an adoption by Professor X." A good indexer will know all about the nematode factor and make sure nematodes are in the index even if not in the table of contents.

Your peers will also influence sales/adoptions in two other ways: directly, through reviews and word-of-mouth, and indirectly, through the status they accord you. We know TAs are often consigned to Publish-or-Perish Purgatory because textbooks are viewed as "impure" science. Whether completeness and timeliness are at all redemptive, I don't know, but at least these virtues should get prominent display in your index.

Indexers plug completeness and timeliness into their "Aha!" appara-

tus. This is the faculty that says, "Aha! This is not a main section, nor yet a minor section, nor even a paragraph—but it's important, or hot stuff right now (or about nematodes); I'll make an entry, or even two."

Adopters (professors) are also interested in such matters as pedagogical aids and special features. The index can point these up. The indexer will ask:

● Should page locators for figures or tables be identified in some way? To cost-conscious publishers thinking typesetting tab, we suggest "t" or "f" instead of the traditional italic or boldface, perhaps reserving these for other features. Knowing where something is illustrated or tabulated is helpful to the user; to the adopter it shows how copiously you have illustrated your points.

● Should defined terms in text be pinpointed by boldface locators? This refinement should be handled with some discretion to make sure the reader is led to terms actually defined, not merely mentioned.

● What other features merit special designations? Possibilities: case studies, boxes.

● Is an introductory explanation needed? For example, the difference between "see" and "see also" is fuzzy to many, and special graphics need to be explained. Authors and publishers often greet the introductory paragraph as a

novelty but then like it.

You may have ideas about these issues, and it is even possible that the publisher will convey these to the indexer. But a good indexer will have suggestions of his or her own.

Example: I recently indexed an introductory biochemistry textbook intended for premed students and biochemistry majors. "Clinical applications" boxes (practical uses) were a major marketing/-pedagogical feature. In the previous edition, "cc" had been put after the page locators for these; it tended to get "lost" in an index already cluttered with special devices. In collaboration with the author I decided to index these (1) as subentries under the related topics and (2) as a mini-subindex in themselves.

This text, although a third edition, was a first-time textbook venture for its current publishers, previously well-known for their basic science texts. At last report it was selling twice as well as anticipated, with adopters praising the index specifically.

Your Index as a Learning/ Teaching Tool

A major textbook in a fundamental subject such as anatomy or biochemistry will be used by students in several ways:

continued
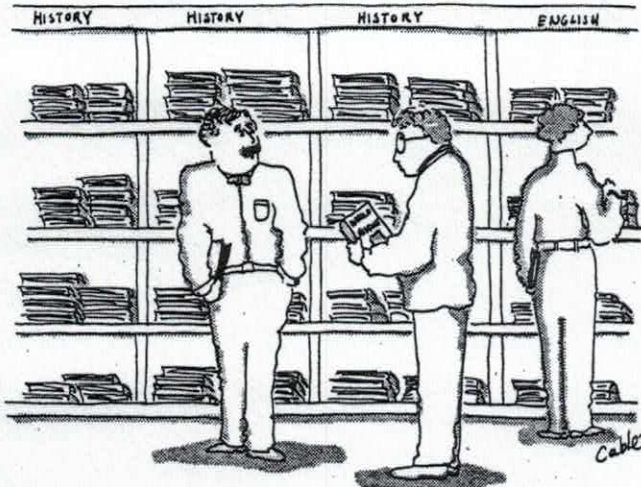
"That's a great textbook—plenty of opportunities to punt, kill the ball, or pass."

● To learn new material: The indexer thinks--detailed topic break-downs; avoid unidentified locators.

● To review previously learned material: The indexer thinks--"double-" or "triple-posting" (entering the topic in a number of likely locations: "Cardiovascular disease: myocardial infarction" but also "Myocardial infarction" and most likely "Atherosclerosis:myocardial infarction and" and so on).

● To study related topics: The indexer thinks--cross-references (Proteins. See also Enzymes.)

● As a reference in professional practice or life: The indexer thinks all of the above plus maximum timeliness.

Level Isn't Just for Playing Fields

Scholarly books challenge the indexer to apply structure and to invent abstractions that summarize long, theoretical discussions, often lacking subheads. Textbooks are much more structured and are liberally supplied with subheads. The topics are almost always concrete. Assuming author and copy editor have done their jobs well, the hierarchy and chronology of ideas, their proportional importance, and their interrelationships will be clear. (Indexing, we find, does tend to expose the deficiencies of the copy editor even when, to paraphrase Perry, we have met the editor and she is us.)

Authors can help by avoiding (1) repeating the major topic as a subhead, (2) using "miscellaneous" and "other" in headings, (3) thinking twice about those "user-friendly" but vague subheads lately become popular. Confronted with a urology text and the subhead "Whither the Foreskin?" we eschewed the urge to index "Foreskin, future of" and made the conceptual leap to "Circumcision." But there's always that deadly pull of temptation.

Despite the structured nature of the textbook, indexing is more than stating the headings in all possible orders and combinations. It is making conceptual connections, knowing that the tidbit one saw about streptokinase (hot topic) should be indexed not only as itself and under "Enzymes" but as "Myocardial infarction: thrombolytic therapy" and in several other places--when there is no heading to say so.

A conscientious indexer will try to find out, from the publisher, the level of the course the book is marketed for. Unfortunately, I often hear: "Oh, it's a low-level textbook [this often translates as "low-budget"], so it doesn't need a detailed index," which translates as "we don't want to pay much." Indexers and TAs know the opposite is true. Low-level books need to be indexed to a fare-thee-well because the user will often not know exactly what he or she is looking for. Your peers will know alternative terms to look under; the novice will not. Consider also that the more detailed (lev-

els of subheadings) the topic break-down--a valuable asset for review or comprehension--the more in synch indexer and index users' thought processes have to be.

As an example, let's come back to our friend "myocardial infarction" (heart attack)—I apologize for the heavy medical slant, but those are the examples that spring most readily to my mind. A medical student or a nursing student beyond an intro course might look for "myocardial infarction" (heart attack)under "Cardiovascular system: diseases." A beginning student of respiratory therapy probably would not. In a text for that beginner, the indexer might double-post or cross-reference "Myocardial infarction" and "Heart attack" and even "AMI (acute myocardial infarction)—see Myocardial infarction." (If the indexer put "attack" as a subentry under "heart," an amateur was foisted upon you.) In a book for "lay" people (what the medical anointed call you and me) you might not find "myocardial infarction" in the index at all--certainly it would be a See cross-reference. And in a book for premed students one would not index "heart attack" lest they fly into rage because the index treats them as lay people.

The indexer thinks:

● Should I reinforce terms by putting the alternative or simpler version in parentheses: Cyanocobalamin (vitamin B)?

● Should I do the same for abbreviations, even if cross-referenced? It may be best to index and spell out all conceivable abbreviations, even those used informally (did you know all CABGs get PEEPed?).

● I must cross-reference very liberally and ask the author to think of cross-references in reviewing the printout.

● I should provide the page range of the main discussion plus a "see also" for topics broken down elsewhere.

● Can a topic with page locators be found in at most two tries?

The indexer may also consider (again the Aha! factor) what special terms—jargon, slang, colorful expression--might help a student

locate a discussion: Lollipop cell configuration? "Pink puffers" and "blue bloaters" (not fish species, but how ICU people refer to patients with two types of emphysema)? Even "KVO (keep vein open). See Heparin." The best indexers are flexible and creative on the user's behalf.

When it comes to alternative terms, cross-references, abbreviations, and clarifications, consultation with you is invaluable. It should be mandatory.

Always, Always, See Author

Indexers do specialize. But to know in every instance which terms are variants, which synonyms, which old, which current requires a degree of specialization that would leave most indexers starving. Probably all of us have found to our chagrin that we have indexed some synonymous terms as separate topics or inadvertently combined incompatibles in a single listing. This will frighten an author on printout, where it's fixable, and infuriate an author if the printed book is where it is first discovered. Hard as it is to believe, there are publishers—major textbook houses at that—who do not submit the index in printout or proof form for author review before the book is published. To the indexer, that's scary. Why do authors let it happen?

You and the indexer should consult (1) before the index is begun, (2) while it is being done, (3) after you see a printout. In the case of large, highly technical books, I now make it a practice to do a mini-index of one or two chapters in rough form for the author to review and talk over with me—if the publisher permits author contact. Even publishers who do not routinely send printouts or proof (usually citing time constraints) may allow consultation at the indexer's request. Common reaction: "Well . . .er . . . I don't think he'd mind. No indexer has ever asked before." (That's discouraging on two counts.) The indexer hasn't the clout to insist. You have.

Always: Ask who the indexer is. Ask to see a vita. (Membership in the American Society of Indexers signifies a professional approach, though there are fine indexers who don't belong.) Ask for a list of projects similar to yours. Make sure the indexer has your name, address, and phone number. Call him or her if you are not called. Establish a human contact. (If this sounds familiar, it's because I said all the same things about copy editors. And by the way, if your copy editor is trained in indexing, she may be the best indexer for your book. That way, if she screwed up the headings, she'll pay the price.)

You can tell an indexer instantly what might take hours to figure out (are "peptide" and "polypeptide" interchangeable; if not, how do they differ and does it matter at this level?) The indexer may discover that you named one alternative as preferred in the text and then used another in the headings. Or that coauthors in a multiauthor book were not consistent in using the preferred term. You can get your preference in the index if you communicate it.

You can tell the indexer the level as you perceived it in teaching the course. You can provide synonyms, alternative terms, trends in usage. You can clarify the subject in response to questions. You know the full forms of abbreviations the copy editor forgot to query. And you know whether you were happy or unhappy with the previous index—which may have been given the indexer as a model—and why. And once you see their teaching value, you can add cogent cross-references to the printout, benefiting both students and sales.

Once you find a good indexer match, stick with it. Indexers, like copy editors, freelance and can move with you.

In the case of the biochemistry textbook, Dr. D. made himself fully available; provided his home phone number and alerted his secretary to my name; said, and meant, "Call me any time--never hesitate." This led, its being December, to exchanges like:

Mrs. D.: "He's up in the spruce putting on the outdoor lights. I'll

get him."

Mss. D: "It's not urgent. Ask him to call back when he's on solid ground."

It also led to maximum effort on my part: I try harder when the author is a person to me. (And I know authors see the index as a challenge instead of a bore when it becomes a true collaboration.) It led, as already mentioned, to an index everyone was happy with in a book that sold better than before. In other words, it brought personal satisfaction to author, indexer, and publisher, and, ultimately, more royalties to the author and more and better-paid indexes to me.

A Word on Cost

To publishers, the index is often a "bargaining chip." They'll pay for it as a concession to you. In the end, of course, you pay for it whether the publisher "does it" (engages and pays the freelancer), contracts for it and charges it to your royalties, or leaves it to you—in

which case you pay for it in your time and effort. You may decide to keep control by finding an indexer you work well with and paying that person yourself.

At my TAA workshop on copy editing, I found authors to be surprised and chagrined at the pay scales: $15 an hour is considered generous for copy editors. Officially rates for indexes are based on even lower pay: $12 an hour or even $10. However, rates are generally quoted by the page: $2.50 to $3.50 per book (not manuscript) page, or a median of $1800 for a 600-page textbook. (How much is your writing time--and, at book's end, your leisure time--worth to you?) More technical topics are at the higher end of the scale.

Some publishers pay by the line. I think this encourages, if not padding, then lax pruning and synthesizing. It takes a lot of moral force to zap or consolidate a line when you know you're tossing 50 cents away thereby--especially given the ungenerous pay scales. Contrary to belief, more is not always better--some topics do not lend themselves to many entries. Although number of entries per page is often used as a rule-of-thumb gauge to quality, it simply does not reflect time or effort. Anatomy books have a multitude of short, double-posted terms ("Peroneal artery" "Artery, peroneal"). They generate many lines very quickly. A single-topic text (one disease, for example, or one genus) may require much synthesizing and combining, with the final index trim but time-consuming to create. Rate should reflect (1) level--often in inverse ratio, and (2) complexity of topic.

Finally, textbook authors would benefit if copy editors and indexers were paid better. End of sermon. End of topic. End of series.

RESOURCE

American Society of Indexers, P. O. Box 386, Port Aransas, TX 78373 (512) 749-6634. Index evaluation checklist (free). Register of Indexers cross-referenced by location and topic ($15). Referrals. Pamphlets and brochures. Software reviews.

CONVENTION INPUT REQUESTED

TAA's Sixth annual convention will be held June 24-26, 1993 in New Orleans, Louisiana and work on the program is in progress. Program Chair for the meeting is Frank Silverman of Marquette University. According to Frank the theme of the program will be "What You Always Wanted to Know About ...". He requests suggestions at an early date. Please suggest topics as well as individuals who might be asked to participate.

◄ Action Requested ►

Provide recommendations for the program of the 1993 convention at once, to

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