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INDEXES: A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF ANY SUCCESSFUL HISTORY BOOK,  
by Margie Towery (OAH Newsletter, Vol. 25, No. 2, May 1997)

Whether an author is preparing her first or her twenty-first manuscript for publication, one critical component to a successful book is its index. Indeed, many librarians will not consider adopting a book that lacks an index. Unfortunately, many authors don't have time to think about this tool, nor do they realize that indexing a book requires a completely different thought process than writing one. In many cases, authors are responsible for providing the index—whether they create it themselves or hire a professional indexer—but if they don't check the fine print in their book contract, they may not realize that until the last minute. Then they are faced with proofreading a complex book *and* indexing it within the space of a few weeks. Therefore it is important to think about the index before this last stage in the publication process.

The American Society of Indexers (ASI) is the only professional organization in the United States solely devoted to the advancement of quality indexing, abstracting, and database construction. A recently formed subgroup of ASI should be of interest to historians and archaeologists. ASI members with a specialty in history and archaeology have joined together in the History/Archaeology Special Interest Group. An alliance of highly skilled, expert indexers with academic and professional backgrounds in these areas, this subgroup wishes to promote excellence in indexes. Quality indexes increase the value of the work an author puts into his manuscript; for in today's information climate, a book is most accessible through its index.

Whether an author chooses to use a professional indexer or to create the book's index herself, there are some general guidelines that can be used to construct and evaluate an index. The following checklist is drawn from ASI's guidelines which in turn draw on guidelines from the American National Standards Institute.

1. An index should include an introductory note to explain any unusual approach to the book's material as well as any special typography (e.g., special treatment of names or italicized page references for tables or illustrations).

2. The physical format should be consistent throughout the index, providing ease of readability, logical organization, and consistent alphabetization (whether word-by-word or letter-by-letter). Punctuation should follow general style rules and be consistent. The index length should be proportionate to the length and complexity of the text (e.g.,

for history books indexes generally run about 6-8% of the total text, depending on space limitations). Note that history book indexes are generally in run-in (i.e., paragraph) format. This puts some limitations on the number of subheadings you can reasonably use.

3. Concepts, people, places, and events should be present in the index in precise, accurate, unambiguous headings.

4. An index should gather references that are either scattered in the text or expressed in varying terminology (e.g., references on Native Americans and American Indians should be grouped together under the term most used, with a cross-reference from the one least used—as long as both terms are used in the same way). Indeed, cross-references are a critical part of an index and are one component of which professional indexers are most aware and can provide the best direction in; authors are often too close to their manuscript to step back and objectively identify all possible audiences and thus include cross-references that reflect the terminology that those diverse readers might use. Cross-references should also be used to direct readers from general to specific information. There may be, for example, a substantial section on city politics in general and then a lengthy discussion of politics in Chicago. So there should be a cross-reference from politics: “*See also* Chicago, politics in.” Or, depending on the number of page references, the information on Chicago could be double-posted: “Chicago, politics in” and “politics, in Chicago.”

5. An index should in fact have an internal structure. Some indexers compare this structure to a tree with its various branches attached to the main trunk. Others suggest that the structure is like threads that interweave. Some branches/threads are main topics with many subheadings; others are more minor (though still of importance to a complete index), with fewer or no subheads. But all are interconnected in some way.

6. Subheadings should be written so that when alphabetized they fall under a term that a reader would look for. For example, “Black Seminoles, yearly census of,” should be “Black Seminoles, censuses of.” If there are many subheadings under Black Seminoles and I am looking strictly for census material on them, I may not continue past the absent “census” to look under “yearly.” (In this case, the page references should probably be double-posted to a main heading of “censuses” as well, especially if there is census information on several groups.) Subheadings, like main headings, should be concise, brief (although that’s occasionally impossible), accurate, and unambiguous.

7. Abbreviations, acronyms, and any abridgment of words or phrases should be explained (and often a cross-reference is a must). For example, if OPEC and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries are both used frequently in the text, information should be gathered under one—perhaps “OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries)” —with a cross-reference from the spelled-out version (unless they fall right next to each other in the index anyway). On the other hand, if OPEC and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries are each mentioned twice, then a double-posting is in order, with all four page locators under both headings.

These are just a few of the components that indexers think about as they prepare back-of-the-book indexes. One thing I always tell beginning indexers to do is to read indexes. As historians, most of you probably have some often-used, well-thumbed books. Do those indexes work for you? Evaluate what works and why. Do the main headings reflect accurately what is in the book? Does the index capture the text's nuances? On the other hand, if you have books whose indexes are frustratingly incomplete, what is lacking?

If an author is not ready to tackle such a daunting task as creating an index, then he can always call on a professional indexer. If an author decides she will create the index but has a few questions, most professional indexers are willing to talk to authors about specific problems. The most important thing is to provide a good index for the book, for many people will approach the text only through the index, to glean the precise information they need (not something authors like to hear, but true nonetheless). So it's nice to know that authors have some resources where indexes are concerned.

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