



Indexing FAQs

We take indexes for granted until they aren't there or drive us crazy. Despite being so important to readers and – if they care about their work being read – authors, indexing is a mystery to many.

If you are commissioning an index, these FAQs might help to answer some of your questions.

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What makes a good index?

A good index helps readers to find what they need quickly and easily:

- > It anticipates how readers will look for information and uses language readers would use. For example, the indexer would not index 'Need for vaccination' as it is, because the reader will look for information about vaccinations under 'V', not under 'N' for 'need'. An author may refer to World War I as 'that appalling European War', but most readers know it as World War I or First World War. The indexer will index it as 'World War I' / 'First World War', not 'European War'.
- > It reveals the interrelationships between topics and concepts. For example, readers who are looking for information on the capture of the MV Maersk *Alabama* by Somali pirates in 2009 would probably be interested in information about both Captain

Richard Phillips and the *Alabama*. By using a 'see also' reference, the indexer is helping the reader to locate more information that might be of interest.

- > It connects information to help readers. For example, Australians say 'thongs' and New Zealanders say 'jandals'. The indexer makes an educated decision on which to use as a main heading. In this case, if the readership may include New Zealanders and the indexer chooses 'thongs' as the main heading, they will also include an entry for 'jandals' but direct the reader to the main entry using a 'see' reference ('jandals see thongs').
- > It contains concise headings and subheadings. For example, 'Safe houses used most often in the underground railway' is too wordy.
- > It contains unambiguous headings. In a book on kings and queens of England, the indexer would not simply use the heading 'Elizabeth'. They would use Elizabeth I / Elizabeth II. In a biography of Gore Vidal, the indexer would not simply use the heading 'Syracuse'. They would use 'Syracuse (New York)'.

Also, the index:

- > should be in correct alphabetical order
- > should not contain spelling mistakes
- > should use correct styles
- > should be of an appropriate size (for example, it might constitute 10 per cent of a detailed textbook book but only 5 per cent or less of a more general work).

Does it matter which indexing software an indexer uses?

No. Indexing software helps the indexer to organise entries, improve consistency and automate routine tasks. But the indexer must still compile the index – the software does not create the index.

Indexing software is really just like old-fashioned library cards and card boxes. Before computers, librarians used a box and card system to help readers to find the books they were looking for. A librarian wrote essential information about a book onto the card and then used a filing box to keep the cards filed in the right order. They could move the card around, update the card for a new edition to show a new author or file it under another call number, but the librarian decided which information was relevant information, what should be put onto the card and where the card should be filed. The librarian chose which books to buy for the library. The type of indexing software an indexer uses is about as relevant to the process of book indexing as the type of card box and system cards the librarian used is to library indexing systems. It is extremely helpful, but it doesn't make decisions.

Apricot Zebra uses Cindex indexing software in writing our indexes. Cindex software assists us to sort index entries and keep style consistent; however, it does not automatically

generate the index. Accurate and effective indexes can only be compiled by human indexers: computers cannot identify key concepts and select the entries that will be relevant for readers. See below under 'Can't I just use the automatic Word indexing function'.

I searched for a term and got quite a few hits, but I noticed the indexer did not index all of them. Have they made a mistake?

No, they have not. The indexer's first concern is to make an index that *is useful to the reader*. The reader will not find every reference useful. Hence, it is the indexer's job to select which entries are useful to the reader and which ones are not.

Indexers spend a lot of time carefully considering which references to include in an index and which ones to discard. They will compare different references to see what is contained in each.

For example, in an annual report, the same information appears in several different places:

Example 1:

Our Cities and People Program is our flagship program delivering services to communities. The government has committed to investing over \$14 million in the program over three years. It commenced in 2016. Over the last year, we have expanded the program to include regional centres. We are engaging with stakeholders to improve the way the program is being delivered.

Example 2:

Our Cities and People Program commenced in 2016. We have expanded it over the last year. See page 50 for more information.

Example 3:

The government has invested \$14 million in the Cities and People Program.

All three examples contain similar elements of information. Only one example contains all information. Therefore, Example 1 will be indexed. Examples 2 and 3 will not be indexed, because all the information the reader needs is in Example 1. If all three were indexed and the reader looked up all three locators as a result, thinking they will find important information in all three places, they would simply find that each one leads them to exactly the same information. This is extremely annoying for the reader and a great waste of their time. Readers want to be taken to the information that is of use to them. It is not useful to be told the same thing three times.

References should not be added just because they are picked up in a Word search. If the index merely replicated a Word search, there would be no point in having an index – you could just use the search function.

Isn't it easier just to use the search function?

No. An index leads the reader to useful information on a subject, not every occurrence of a word. An index is more helpful if, for example, the information you are looking for is discussed without the key word you're using in your search. An indexer will recognise the subject even where the key word is missing and will ensure that it is included in the index.

For example, you are looking for the People and Cities Program. However, in one chapter in the document, the author has referred to it as 'the 2016 program'. In another chapter, it has abbreviated it to the PC Program. Another refers to it as 'our communities program'. If you search for 'People and Cities', you will not find all information. Searching '2016' and 'program' will bring up a huge hits to be sifted through. Also, to make sure you had found everything, you would then need to guess what the title might have been shortened to, and there might be several options. But an index takes you directly to what you are looking for.

Can't I just use the automatic Word indexing function?

No, not if you want a useful index. Word gives you a 'concordance' index, which is just a list of words with a long string of page numbers, including a lot of irrelevant information. Word cannot identify ideas and concepts that relate to each other. It cannot distinguish between the meanings of two words that are spelt the same way. It cannot make cross-references because it cannot connect information. It cannot separate relevant material from irrelevant material. A computer does not have comprehension.

For example, you have found a book on famous terrorists and you want to find information on Carlos the Jackal. The author of the book has used both 'Carlos the Jackal' and 'The Jackal'. The Word indexing function won't know that 'The Jackal' is 'Carlos the Jackal' – that they are the same person – so it will index them separately. Also, because it doesn't see the relationship, it won't create a link between them. So you might find information under 'Carlos the Jackal', but you won't realise there is much more information under 'The Jackal'. An indexer will index all references to Carlos the Jackal, regardless of how the individual has been referred to.

Do indexers index everything they find?

No. Indexers only index material that is useful, substantive and relevant. They do not index passing mentions.

For example, you have a biography of a famous chess player and you are browsing the index to look for information that might interest you. You see the entry 'Churchill, Winston'. You are very interested in this supposed connection between the chess player and Winston Churchill. You go to the page indicated in the index and find this:

He was a great teacher of chess. But, unfortunately, he smoked so many cigars that his students started calling him 'Winston'.

In this instance, an indexer should not index 'Churchill, Winston'. First, there is no actual information on Winston Churchill in the book. If a reader has followed the locator looking for information on Winston Churchill, their time will have been wasted. Secondly, it is misleading – a person scanning the index might get the idea that the chess player and Winston Churchill were connected in some way.

Why are subheadings so important?

Each entry should have no more than five or six page locators after it. If there are more than that, it gets really difficult for a reader to find the information they need. It's a sign that subheadings should have been used because the topic is too detailed for an entry without subentries.

For example, you are seeking information about the Cowra breakout: the attempted escape of Japanese prisoners of war from the Cowra camp during World War II. You have a book about prison escapes. You find the following entry in the index:

World War II, 22, 35–40, 41–2, 45, 47–50, 53, 56, 64–8, 95–96, 108–9, 162, 165, 168, 170

Most readers will try the first couple of locators and then give up when they don't find the information they want. The persistent few would continue to follow up each page reference, only to be taken to a lot of information they are not interested in.

Compare that entry to the following:

World War II, 22

 Camp 57, Italy, 56

 Changi Prison, Singapore, 35–40

 Colditz Castle, Germany, 64–8, 165

 Cowra, Australia, 45, 47–50

 Grizedale Hall, 22, 108–9, 165

 Konigstein Castle, Germany, 64–8, 168

 RAF Carlisle, UK, 95–96, 162

 Stalag Luft III, Germany, 22, 64–8, 170

 Wooden Horse escape, 53

You can see how much faster it will be to find your information about Cowra where subheadings are used.