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Gibbs: Q&A on Indexing Science Books—Without an Index, a Book is a Doorstop

by John W. Henson, MD

I have a personal rule in buying books: no index, no purchase. To double check, all six of the books on my nightstand at the moment (mainly biographies) have an index.

Upon discovering that NSWA member [Judi Gibbs is a professional indexer](#), it seemed like a good time to cart out the "know three things about everything" rule. Here are three questions, with Judi's answers.

SW: Describe the indexing process. Do you read the entire text, making notes as you go? What computer tools are available?

Gibbs: People index somewhat differently, but the process I use is very close to that of most experienced indexers. Indexing requires careful analysis and thought.

The books arrive in sections. I begin by indexing the first chapter, creating a main entry for the subject of the chapter and subheadings for each of the major topics of the chapter. I then double post the subheadings as appropriate.

The next step is to go through the chapter looking for additional material that deserves to be indexed. Consistency is important. If a subject is picked up, every significant mention should be picked up. Passing mentions are not indexed.

The final step of indexing is the edit. It can take up to a third of the total indexing time, and it is extremely important. The initial entries are a rough draft, and the edit turns them into a polished product.

Dedicated indexing software makes the mechanics immensely easier. There are three major packages on the market. The one I use is SKY.

ScienceWire: Your background as a librarian, writer on science, engineering and medical subjects and as an editor would seem to be ideal for indexing scientific books. But I would think that indexing requires significant knowledge of the particular subject. Given the breadth of science topics, are there areas for which you would not be comfortable preparing an index?

Gibbs: Knowledge is essential. When I index an engineering book or other technical item, I don't have to understand all the details, but I do need to have at least a qualitative understanding of the text, and I turn down books that I don't feel competent to index.

I have also accepted books with the understanding that the editor would provide a contact for someone who could answer questions. I once indexed a collection of papers for a Nobel Prize winner, and the material was definitely within reach but sufficiently specialized that I needed to be able to ask questions.

The editor happened to be a colleague of the Nobel Prize winner, and he seemed relieved that I asked for his assistance.

SW: What are the work flow and quality issues in indexing?

Gibbs: Indexing is the last link in the publishing chain. The production schedule always slips, and indexers are sometimes urged to make up the slippage, so the window for indexing is always tight. An experienced indexer can often work quickly, but a quality index still requires time.

Usability testing is a technique that is still in its infancy. I know one doctoral student who is working on it. One of the challenges is that most books have multiple audiences, and the usability of an index may depend on which audience is using it. There really isn't time for this step.

Editors and publishers sometimes make changes to indexes after indexers submit them, and the changes are usually not an improvement.

Still another issue is space for the index. Historically, publishers have not allowed enough space for indexes, and indexers have had to do some unfortunate trimming during the edit. Today many publishers realize that indexes sell books, and now I am seeing a new and unfortunate trend: Publishers are using indexes to pad books. I recently completed an index that was twice as long as it should have been. Half of the index was padding, and the length was non-negotiable. Padding does NOT improve index quality.

I am glad to hear that you insist that the books you buy are indexed. You will be interested to know that about a year ago the American Society for Indexing gave a Golden Turkey Award to Sarah Palin and Harper Collins for publishing *Going Rogue* without an index. The president of the society said that a book of this nature by a major political figure could be an important contribution to history, but without an index, it becomes a door stop.

SW: On behalf of ScienceWire readers, thank you, Judi.

Gibbs: You are most welcome.