



by Peg Mauer

Many thanks to Glenda Browne, David M. Brown, Jan C. Wright, Robin Hilp, Iris Ailin-Pyzik and Caroline Parks for their contributions to this recent discussion on the Index-L list.

Q: (Glenda Browne) I am currently working on my first Windows Help Index project, and I have a question about creating "See" references in online help.

As I understand it, there is no way of putting proper See references in a help index because every index entry (or reference) has to be written in and associated with a specific topic. So every reference in the index has to lead somewhere, even if you would rather it didn't.

I have seen a suggestion that because of this you should put the See reference at the most important topic (or section) about that subject. The trouble with this is that the user who does click on the reference will find one topic, and not know that others are available under another name. Another alternative is to write the See reference at every topic that it would apply to (but then you might as well have made double entries).

A third alternative that was suggested to me by one of the authors is to create a dummy topic just for See references. I have been writing all of the references at that topic. If someone selects the reference (instead of reading it and following the instruction,) they open a box which says "You have selected a term which is not used in this index, etc."

They are told how to return to the index and select the correct term. One problem I envisage with this approach is that the topic will fill up. I think I might need to create a number of topics and sort the references alphabetically. Has anyone tried anything similar, or can you envisage any problems?

A final alternative is to list all the synonyms in a synonym table and have the system automatically generate double entries every time it builds the index. (This is proprietary software and this part would have to be written.)

Glenda.

A: (David M. Brown) This is where I do nearly all of my work, and I don't do any of that stuff. In hypertext indexes—and especially help—I don't use See and See also references. I duplicate subentries.

Say the heading "sanitation engineer" has subentries "clothing," "equipment," and "training." In a printed document, I might create an entry like "trash collector. See sanitation engineer"—in help, I'd simply list "trash collector" with the same three subentries.

sanitation engineer
clothing
equipment
training
trash collector
clothing
equipment
training

It's simply an accommodation for the limitations of the medium. (And it's not like we're wasting paper to have the extra entries.)

If it's really important to comment on the inappropriateness of the term "trash collector," I might just list "trash collector" (without the subentries) as a pointer to the place in the help file where I explain why and provide the preferred alternative, "sanitation engineer." Armed with the knowledge of the preferred term, the reader can look it up in the index.

A: (Caroline Parks) But See references are useful for vocabulary control, and in online help particularly you may want to wean users from old terminology, or simply make sure that they're aware of the terminology used by the product in question.

Another alternative, since it sounds like you are able to add topics to the project, is to create your own mini-TOC topics that link to the topics in question. Using David's example, if there are three topics entitled "Clothing for sanitation engineers," "Equipment for sanitation engineers," and "Training for sanitation engineers," your TOC topic would be called "Sanitation Engineers," and would include nothing but links to the three detail topics.

Your keyword, then, would be "trash collectors. See sanitation engineers" and would point to the TOC topic with the links.

This way the user registers the terminology that you have chosen for the index, and gets an overview of the information available in the index all at the same time. And if

(Continued on Page 10)

she follows one link and it doesn't answer her question, she simply uses the Back button to return to the TOC topic, and follows the next link.

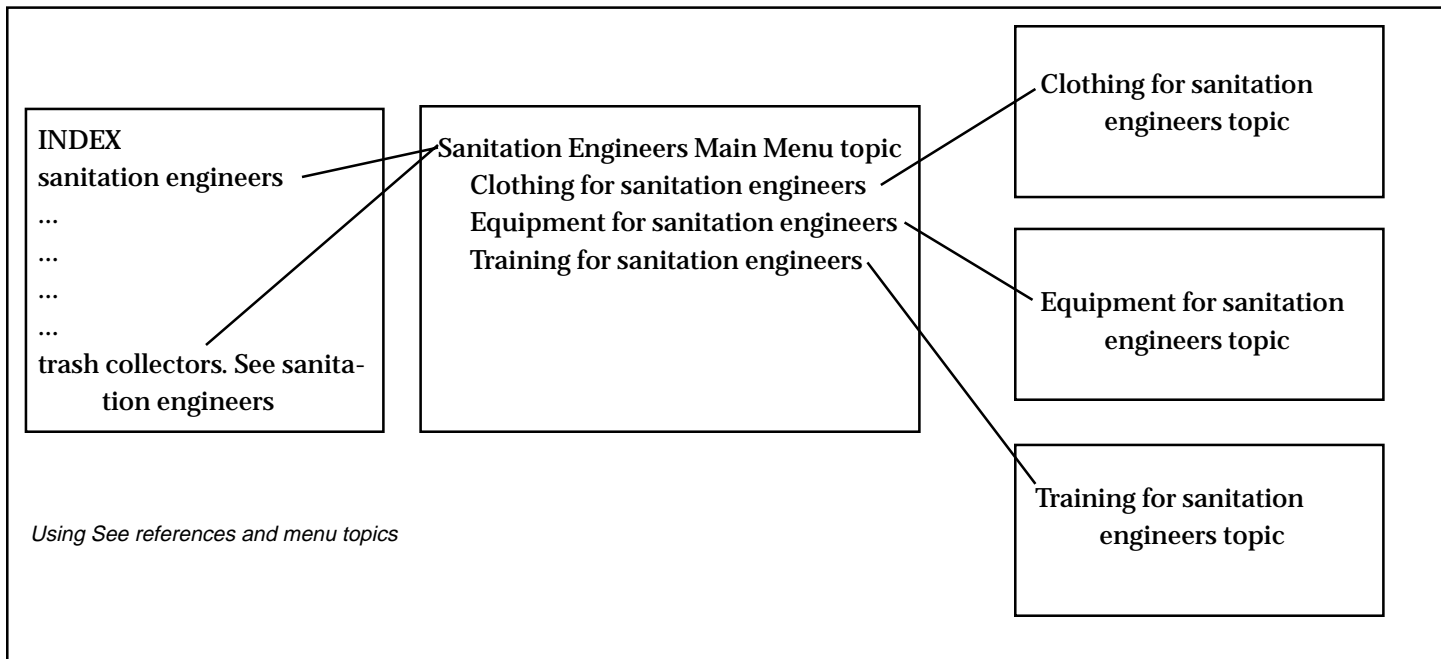
And maybe you'll get to do your next online help index in HTML Help, where the cross-references can be "live" — they actually jump to the target entry in the index!

topic" references in their text, which will lead the user on to the information. At least if they are well designed, they do.

I would not bury all the See references in the same blank topic to force the little dialog box. You have a limit of 1024 characters in a K footnote. Some folks believe you can have multiple K footnotes in a topic, but I have never found that to

A: (Iris Ailin-Pyzik) Would it be possible, at the index entry that would carry the See reference, to have something like:

trash collectors. Click here to see under sanitation engineers and have it switch to the proper index location? This would address the vocabulary control issues and still make it fairly painless for the



Much more intuitive for the user, and much nicer for us indexers, too!

A: (Jan C. Wright) I love Caroline's idea of linking to a specialized topic that you build into the project. If your help authors will allow that, that would be my first choice as well.

WinHelp is so limited in many ways that I think users suffer no matter what we do. I put in See and See also references, using the trick of embedding them in an overview topic. Usually I feel that works okay, because overview topics usually have See also references or "related

work. I also think the dialog box is really annoying. Users want to get somewhere, and they are impatient online. Don't make them repeat themselves if you can avoid it. Let them move forward, which is why I like Caroline's idea of links in that topic.

You can also duplicate entries to your heart's content, but again, remember you only have 1024 characters — I run out of room when I duplicate, so I do use vocabulary control. With simple topics, it is not a problem, but some help systems have long complex topics, and I need every one of those characters...

user to move to the right location in the index. This of course is a software functionality issue, rather than solely an indexing one.

A: (Jan C. Wright) Iris, WinHelp doesn't allow this — HTMLHelp does.

As David pointed out, WinHelp's development is dead, and Microsoft will not develop it further. But there are also add-ons and enhancements third parties have developed.

HTMLHelp developers did listen to indexers in the development of HTMLHelp — the man in charge of it for years, Ralph Walden, was very

responsive to ideas, and responded to emails, but was not able to get everything implemented that indexers wanted. It was great of him to listen — at one conference he mentioned that indexing in Help was extremely important! So HTMLHelp has better active See referencing, and the index stays up on the screen so you get back to it easily. A much better system, but still with its flaws.

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A: (Glenda Browne) Thanks to everyone for such useful responses on the online See references topic.

It has struck me when I have been editing this index that I come to the job with very much a back-of-book indexing approach. There are some things that have been well-developed in book indexing that just don't happen in other media.

However, I have also discovered one advantage of online help indexing, and one thing they do well, and that is a focus on not only doing what we think users might like, but also going out and asking them what they would like. It is rare for a book indexer to get feedback from users or potential users; for online indexers it seems like the obvious thing to do.

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Q: (Robin Hilp) *If I have a short (less than one scroll-bar), comprehensive summary/redirection page for a smallish topic, should I also index the "redirectee" pages individually as subheads under the topic's main index entry?*

This situation happens several places in the manual I'm currently working on. Let's take an example. The topic is "exiting" and that includes exiting the application (a

debugger) using the Toolbar's Exit menu item, exiting individual windows using the individual windows' Exit menu items, and exiting one of those windows using a typed Exit command.

All that is summarized in the one page on "Exiting." The appropriate menu items are mentioned on the pages for the Toolbar and each other individual window. The Exit command also has its own page. The "Exiting" page has a link to the Toolbar page and the Exit command page.

1. I could just have one entry in the index, "exiting," that points to the "Exiting" summary/redirection page. That would get the reader to a description of "how to exit the debugger," "how to exit the command-line interface aka Shell window," "how to exit other individual windows," and a link to "syntax of the Exit command." The reader would then have to look up the individual window names in the index to find actual screen shots of the File menu Exit item for each individual window (except the Shell window).

2. Or, I could have:

- Breakpoint window
- exiting
 - Breakpoint window
 - command-line interface
 - <topics found are the Shell window and to the Exit command>
 - debugger
 - <topics found are the summary/redirection page and the Toolbar page>
- Exit command
- ...
- Shell window
 - <topics found are the Shell window and the Exit command>

Toolbar

<there are 13 windows, I'm not going to list them all here>

3. Or, I could have:

- exiting
 - command-line interface
 - <topics found are Shell window & Exit command pages>
 - debugger
 - <topics found are the "Exiting" page and the Toolbar page>
- individual windows
 - <topics found are the "Exiting" page, the Exit command page, and all the individual window pages>

Now, besides this controversial "exiting" entry, I do also have:

- command-line interface
- command dictionary
 - <topic found is a page where all hundred-odd commands, including Exit, are both listed alphabetically and tabulated by functionality, with links>
- exiting
 - <topics found are the Exit command and the Shell window page>
- Exit command
- Toolbar
 - exiting the debugger
 - <topic found is the "Exiting" summary/redirection page>

I'm inclined to go with method 1 or 2 — 3 seems bloated to me. Because I'm up against a deadline, my strategy for now is to use 1 for this release and expand it to 2 at the next revision of this manual. In any case, I'd like to know what folks here on the list would do. BTW, since this is an online manual, space is not an issue.

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