

AtoZ: The Newsletter of STC's Indexing SIG

STC society for technical communication

Vol. 4 No. 1: January, 2001

In This Issue

From the editor
The Lighter Side of Indexing
Telephone Seminar on Usability
Technical Indexer?
Upcoming Events
Regional Representatives

From the editor:

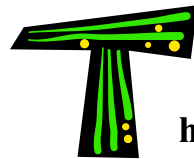
Don't know about the rest of you, but here in New Mexico it has snowed and snowed, until the drifts are high enough to cover portions of my office window.

Between snow, dot com failures, my hard drive's failure, *Newsweek* articles on layoffs, and power outages, we need a little levity to keep warm. Bill Collins bows in with an essay on the lighter side of indexing, in hopes that if your skies are grey, this will make them a little bluer.

And Bill Graham writes a great first-person account of how people evolve into the technical indexing lead role within a group. Those of you who find yourself falling into that role, by accident or by choice, will probably share some of his observations.

May your indexes always compile!

Jan C. Wright



The Lighter Side of Indexing

Most of us at least pay lip service to the assertion that indexers bring value to our technical documentation. We acknowledge, when we're being especially realistic and honest, that: (1) people don't read an entire piece of technical documentation, but rather seek specific information; (2) if readers can't find the information they want, it might as well not be there; and (3) an index provides readers with quick, easy access to that relevant information.

Surveys and studies repeatedly show that readers rate the index as one of the most important features of technical documentation. In fact, the number-one complaint from users of technical manuals is "no good index." Readers expect indexes to be there to help them find what they need, whether the document is on paper or online.

☛ Usability tests conducted in bookstore chains reveal that when people are selecting a book from several books on the same topic, they often flip to the index—if there is one—in each book and make their selection based on the index of the book. (A contributor to the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* observed,

"One scholar I know argued that he could stand books with academic flabby writing, endless cross-references, and bibliographies filled mostly with the author's previous pretentious books; the one thing he could not abide was a bad index."¹⁾

☛ When acquisition librarians make choices about which books to order for their library's collections, they routinely reject books that lack an adequate index.

☛ The quality of an index (or its lack of quality) can have a significant impact on a customer's perception of the usability of a product: if information in the documentation is perceived as being hard to find, the product itself may come to be regarded as untrustworthy.

Despite the invaluable contribution of an indexer to the ultimate utility of documentation, indexing is often assumed to be tedious, detail-obsessed drudge work, and those who index professionally are sometimes perceived as obsessive, repetitive, and probably dull drones—modern equivalents of galley slaves.

by William L. Collins

But in fact, many people find indexing to be mentally stimulating, rewarding, and even fun! The indexer is an advocate for all potential users of a document, and as such has the satisfaction of making information accessible. A good index discriminates between useful/additive information and mere passing mentions—it captures content, not words—so

indexers have the intellectual challenge of making that distinction through close textual analysis.

Indexers also share a passion for words and wordplay (as well as for crossword puzzles and cats!) and have a keenly honed sense of humor and irony, which may be a self-survival requirement of the profession. For a glimpse into the workings of the indexer's mind, consider perusing one of the professional journals² or check out index-l, an indexer's list serv³. These sources will provide a better understanding of what indexers actually do, how they do it, and how their sense of humor helps them stay sane in the process; you'll also gather insights to help you improve information retrieval in your own documentation.

Some of the best indexer humor is at the expense of authors or publishers who make unreasonable or ill-considered requests that diminish the quality of the published document. The following incidents and indexer reactions are sampled from discussions in the index-l list serv. Are any of you authors guilty of these sins? If so, beware the wrath of your indexer!

"[I] just received this request from the author I'm working for: She wants me to add names into the index which are not included in the text! Citing page numbers does present a slight problem. Don't know whether to laugh or cry!"

"One more thing, [the author] has added the following entry: 'Experience, 144-45.' Say what? That could apply to every page in the book (Experience, 1-210 passim). I've ... pointed out the

difficulty in citing entries with no page numbers and questioned the rationale behind the new entry. I've also pointed out that we've already shot past tomorrow's deadline."

Members of the list were generous with their sympathy for this indexer's plight:

"This does beat all. What would be the purpose of this with no locators? Are there book titles in the text without authors but she wants them in the index, referencing the title? Gee, shouldn't she have thought of this when citing the titles? Are you supposed to reference bibliography pages?"

One wag suggested:

"Maybe you are supposed to make up the locators. What was it that Reagan Budget Director David Stockman said? 'Nobody understands these numbers anyway.'"

Another member, responding to the author's desire to add names to the index that didn't appear in the text, said:

"What an opportunity! Please add my name to the index!"

Others contributed horror stories of their own:

"Sometimes authors do present us with [index term] lists that ... can be very useful when the subject of the index is something in which we are not particularly well versed. On the flip side, and to be honest, I have seen some interesting lists like the one that included the names of restaurants where the author and his subject had eaten! Like, 'We grabbed a bite to eat at _____

A to Z: The Newsletter of STC's Indexing SIG

A to Z is published three times yearly (January, May, and September) by the Society for Technical Communication's Indexing Special Interest Group.

Peg Mauer SIG Manager
pmauer@aol.com, 716-724-7922

Barbara Cohen ... Public Relations Chair
becohen653@aol.com, 317-359-1219

Jan Wright Newsletter Editor
jancw@wrightinformation.com,
505-281-2600

Bill Graham ... Upcoming Events Editor
wggraham@mindspring.com
941-739-4218

Seth Maislin Webmaster
smaislin@world.std.com, 617-818-1885

Thanks to Mike Rossa, Beth Hamilton,
& Jana Busse, our vigilant proofreaders!
Subscriptions for non-SIG members are
\$20.00 per year.

Reprints of any of the original material
herein are permissible with the proper
attribution (source, including date of
issue, name of author). Please send a
copy of the publication in which A to Z
material is reprinted to the editor at the
address on the last page.

Copyright 2001 -- Society for Technical
Communication
"Designing the Future of Technical
Communication"

Society for Technical Communication
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1822
703-522-4114
703-522-2075 (fax)
stc@stc-va.org
www.stc-va.org

 society for technical communication

before we went to the meeting.' Yes, they were passing mentions, but the author wanted them in the index."

"Just a note of consolation to all of you dealing with nuisance clients:

1. We've had publishers ask us to finish the index on a date preceding the day we were to receive the remaining page proof.
2. We've had publishers and editors ask us to send them the 'first half' of the index, so they could get to work on it while we finish the second half.
3. I once had an author present me with a list of 'very important' terms that he wanted me to index out of alphabetical order, so that they'd appear at the beginning of the index, where everyone could find them right away."

Item number 3 above is particularly egregious. As good indexers know, you violate a user's expectations at your peril. And indexers may find gentle ways of repaying an author for this kind of absurdity:

"Several times in the past I was presented with a list of the author's terms to incorporate in the index. In each case a considerable number of terms were nowhere to be found in the text. I thought the missing terms had been in earlier drafts and were edited out. Perhaps it was on purpose! Anyway, since it was very time-consuming to search for terms that aren't there, I now have a special rate which discourages author intervention."

"Brings to mind a billing ploy I used years ago when I ran a

typing and editing service—the 'All Creatures Great and Small' billing strategy: If you have a nuisance for a client, then you add a little extra to the bill. And I did. Several times."

"A homeowner with a leaking sink called a plumber and asked his rates. The plumber replied:

'I get \$50.00 an hour. If you watch, \$75.00. If you help, \$100.00.'

Indexers can also laugh at themselves, generate spoof indexes, or leave an occasional personal "signature" in an index, recognizing that it may rarely be noticed and appreciated. Here are a few examples:

"There was a monster book on childcare, 1422 pages long, that came out a number of years ago. Nestled in the index someplace between 'babies' and 'bottles' was 'birds, for the, pp. 1-1422.'"

"The book on childcare is by Nelson, published by W. B. Saunders. The entry appeared in the first edition, and the indexer was his daughter. It has been carried since in tribute to Dr. Nelson."⁴

Some index entries are the stuff of legend. Here are two versions of a similar tale, taken from an index-I discussion:

"Our neighbor ... works in the medical school here as a grant writer, and one of the doctors she

works with brought to her a textbook ... [written by someone] who is evidently one of the most knowledgeable people in the field, and has the ego to prove it. In fact, he evidently has a reputation around medical schools as being a first-class S.O.B.,

especially concerning women. [Our neighbor] had occasion to look up some disease that starts with the letters "ch," and discovered 'Chauvinism, male. 1-568.' A little more research revealed that this index entry only showed up around the 3rd edition, and mysteriously and quietly disappeared in the 5th or 6th."

"... Right after my residency, I found the following listing in the index of the 1980 edition of the venerable textbook Williams Obstetrics: 'Chauvinism, male, variable amounts of, pages 1-1102'—the length of the entire book. What editor or indexer had inserted this entry in anonymous protest? We will probably never know."

Some indexes can be compelling reading all by themselves, and prove that the niche genre of "index humor" is alive and well. For example, the index to Joe Queenan's book on U.S. culture, titled *America*, contains a number of gems. Subentries under the heading for Michael Bolton include: "ability to make 'Yesterday' actually sound worse than the original, 8; federal offences of, 8; likened to



ebola virus, 7-8.” Or consider: “Swayze, Patrick: as lynchpin of anticloning argument, 84”; “Joel, Billy: entire career called into question, 63-67”; and “Polloi, hoi: author’s troubled relationship with, 3.”⁵

Perhaps this sort of tongue-in-cheek rebelliousness is a reaction against the “indexing as drudgery” image that indexers historically have had to endure. Indeed, though some of us might jokingly equate the act of indexing with a prison sentence, that connection has not always been metaphorical. In Ireland in the 1950s, indexing of a daily paper was carried out by “forgers, embezzlers, and other bright boys” from the penitentiary. In the 1980s, a census indexing project was performed by inmates of a local Gloucestershire County prison. And in the U.S. in 1883, a public-spirited contributor to *The Nation* offered this suggestion:

“Let all convicts who can read and write be set, under competent supervision, to indexing books; and let those

who cannot, receive the necessary instruction as soon as may be ... The kind of labor proposed is peculiarly suited to the reformatory idea, being incomparable for teaching order, patience, humility, and for thoroughly eradicating the last trace of the Old Adam in whoever pursues it.”⁶

No wonder indexers need to maintain a sense of humor!

Notes

1. Quoted in *The Indexer*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Oct. 1999), p. 196. In addition to scholarly articles about the art and science of indexing, *The Indexer* regularly compiles and prints portions of book reviews that praise a book for the quality of its index, or censure it for the shoddiness or absence of one. These reviews



can be very illuminating about the value an index contributes to the overall perceived worth of a book or reference document.

- 2 *Key Words* is the bimonthly bulletin of the American Society of Indexers. *The Indexer*, published in England, is the international journal of indexing.
- 3 To subscribe to index-l, see the instructions on page 10.
- 4 *The Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics*, published by W. B. Saunders, is now in its 16th edition (2000) and weighs in at 2,414 pages.
- 5 *The Indexer*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Oct. 1998), p. 100.
- 6 “Indexing as Hard Labour: International Instances.” *The Indexer*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Oct. 2000), p. 71.

Bill Collins, an indexer wannabe and senior STC member, creates indexes on too-infrequent occasion for DuPont, where he has over 20 years of writing, editing, and training experience. He received his M.A. in English from the University of Delaware.

STC to Hold Telephone Seminar on “Getting Started with Usability Testing”

The Society for Technical Communication will offer a two-part telephone seminar on “Getting Started with Usability Testing.” Part 1 will be March 7, part 2 will be March 14. Conducted by Carol M. Barnum, professor of technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University and award-winning author, the seminar will answer questions about one of the most talked-about issues in business today.

For details, including an explanation of how telephone seminars work, please visit www.stc-va.org/usabilitytest.html. For more information about STC, please visit www.stc-va.org or call (703) 522-4114.



visit our

website!

[www.stc.orgpics/
indexing/](http://www.stc.orgpics/indexing/)