

Web Indexing Uncovers a Treasure Trove of Information

In ancient Egypt, the famous librarian, Callimachus of Cyrene, created a subject index to the 120,000 scrolls in the great Library of Alexandria's collection. Indexes continue to guide readers today—helping them find information using a variety of keywords and gathering similar information under a single topic. While I largely index print books and manuals, I thought I'd practice the art of the ancient Egyptian librarians in a new medium: the web. When I stumbled across *Writer's Block*, a web magazine for writers, Alexandria loomed before me.

Writer's Block <<http://www.writersblock.ca>> is a quarterly web magazine that publishes insightful and entertaining articles for and about "Canadians in the writing trade." Published online since 1995, *Writer's Block* offers a treasure trove of information that is still relevant today. In reading through its back issues, I discovered topics ranging from the state of sexual expression in Canada and managing a complex technical documentation project to understanding the changing art of Chinese calligraphy.

Until recently, you could search for

these topics in the magazine's archive—if you happened to know the issue and title of the article in which the relevant information was discussed. Or, you could search through the archive by article category—Feature, Essay, Interview, Business Word, Book Review, Origins, Letters to Writer's Block, and Technology—with each category listing every article it ever published. While it was possible to locate interesting and useful information, much time could be involved if you didn't already have a good idea of where to look.

Since the magazine invites its readers to make article submissions, I thought I'd supplement its archive by submitting an index instead. Indexes work particularly well in web sites that have a flat structure with only one or two levels of hierarchy. Indexes complement search engines on larger web sites; for smaller sites, like *Writer's Block*, they provide a cost-effective alternative.

The Challenge

Writer's Block magazine has over 150 individual articles in its archive covering a diverse range of subjects and points of

view. Unlike a printed book, for example, the site has no chapters or thematic sections to organize related information. A strong analysis of topics was required in the index to bring like material together.

When printed, many of the articles are several pages long. In the absence of page numbers, I had to choose between linking to an article as a whole or to a specific spot within an article. To create a useful resource, I decided that most of the index entries would address an article as a whole, but that some specific information within an article would also need to be indexed.

I began the indexing process by printing out each article and reading it through. Next, I noted the index entries, as well as potential "See" and "See also" cross-references, in ink in the margin of the printed copy. Finally, I entered the index headings, related URLs, and cross-references into a program called Macrex <http://www.macrex.com/>, a sort of word processor for creating indexes, for final editing and production of the HTML code.

Macrex works like a stack of index cards in which you make one index entry per

STC Member Wins the AusSI Web Indexing Award!

Fred Brown, one of our members, and a contributor to *A to Z*, recently won the AusSI Web Indexing Award. The judges' comments stated that "This is an excellent index, well laid out, contained on a single page, and conspicuously free from gadgets and gimmicks." The index was created for the *Writer's Block* site Fred discusses in his article above.

Congratulations, Fred! You make us all proud.

Since we are no longer publishing in print, please check our Web site (www.stcsig.org/idx/) for information on all events. Please send upcoming conference and meeting announcements to our events editor, Colleen Dunham, colleendunham1819@hotmail.com.

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card. The software keeps these “electronic index cards” sorted in alphabetical order while you work and provides quick tools for various indexing tasks. Once completed, Macrex generates the index in HTML format.

The resulting *Writer’s Block* index is fully hypertext-linked with regular index entries linking to articles. “See” and “See also” cross-references link to the specific heading within the index. For example, clicking “indigenous community. See Native community” takes you directly to the heading Native community in the index.

When creating the index, I kept Macrex and Internet Explorer open at the same time. I located the relevant article in Internet Explorer and copied the URL into Macrex with the index entry. I entered only one URL for a given index entry. If a topic was discussed in two separate articles, I created two different, more specific index headings—one for each article. For example, the topic “brainstorming when writing” was subdivided into two subheadings:

- brainstorming
 - when writing comedy
 - when writing greeting cards

While most of the index entries pointed to the top of an article, *Writer’s Block* staff entered HTML targets in each paragraph of each article to accommodate the indexing of specific information. It is often advantageous for index entries to point to the top of an article so the readers can see where they are; however, many of the *Writer’s Block* articles were too long for readers to easily scan. I decided that, in some cases, a direct link to the specific information would be more useful to readers. For example, “Bradbury, Ray, on the art of writing” creatively links directly to the top

of the article entitled “Zen in the Art of Writing: Essays on Creativity” while “libel chill, effect on freedom of speech” links to the subheading “Looking Forward: The Threat of Libel,” which is three quarters of the way down the page in an article entitled “Under Attack: An Update on Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Canada.” Where possible, links to specific information were aimed at “targets” located in subheadings within an article in order to provide at least a minimum of context for the reader.

Indexing the magazine’s original works of poetry and short fiction presented an intellectual challenge. Because analyzing topics in such creative works as “From *little flashlights*,” “Ashes to Stourhead” and “Ode to a Pickle in a Pinetree” proved difficult, I simply listed each title separately in the index. Perhaps someday I’ll have the courage to go back and try to distill their essential meanings.

While the original works of fiction were listed under the heading fiction and the original poetry under poems, articles that addressed aspects of writing fiction or poetry were listed under the separate headings of fiction writing and poetry writing. The separation kept the lists from getting mixed up with fuller index subheadings that addressed aspects of a topic.

Web Indexes Are a Living Thing

Because *Writer’s Block* is published quarterly, the index will be a living document that must be updated with each new issue. With this in mind, I designed the index to facilitate easy maintenance. For example, I used “See”

cross-references rather than double-posting subheadings under different synonyms.

- careers. See jobs
- ...
- employment. See jobs
- ...
- jobs
 - brain research in relation to
 - Canada Council grants
 - career change to technical writing
 - creating an impression
 - effects of automation
 - effects of technology
 - finding consulting contracts
 - interviews for technical writing
 - literary versus non-literary writing
 - management skills
- ...

Unexpected Treasure

The indexing exercise also uncovered some changes to capitalization that have occurred over the years: “Web” to “web” and “Intranet” to “intranet.” This discovery prompted the magazine’s editors to consider whether they would update the entire magazine for consistency or maintain it with different capitalization as a record of the change in language practices.

Is there treasure at *Writer’s Block*? Yes, but it’s no longer hidden. You can search the index for a specific topic from marketing to literacy to Native publishing. Or you can let serendipity take you for a stroll. Regardless of how you use it, the *Writer’s Block* index provided additional—and much-needed—search capabilities to a site that deals with a myriad of topics.

*Fred Brown is a double bass player who loves indexing almost as much as making music. You can reach him at Allegro Technical Indexing
www.allegrotechindexing.com/index.htm.*