On Indexing

Guest post for True Stories Writing School newsletter: A Break in the Radio Silence
Life in a tornado // The art of the index
published on 07.07.2021 for Katherine May

Before I start I should say that I am by no means an authority on indexing. I’m just coming to the end of my training and although I have been indexing in one form or another for years in my other job as a cataloguer, I’m still a relative newcomer to the profession of indexing and to freelancing. But when I connected to this lovely group of you on here, I thought I would like to see what you all as non-fiction authors have to say. I wanted to understand the writing process through your eyes so that I can be a better indexer. I wanted to know how you approach your topics, construct your work and deal with the publishing process in general.

In return for letting me have a peep at your workflows, I can offer a little insight into the world of indexing and hopefully it will help when you come to make decisions in this area.

The first thing I realised as I began to learn this skill is that it’s really tricky to do well. It’s easy to just Ctrl+F and word spot and write an alphabetical list at the back of your book. A good index is more than that though, it’s an analytical and structured study of your work and will link topics with cross references and draw together the themes that run through your book. It should be designed with the reader in mind and uncover connections that they never thought of and also provide them with access points to terms that they are likely to want to look up. It will make sure related and synonymous terms are entered so the reader who looks for ‘flowers’ will also be directed to mentions of ‘wildflowers’. An index is useful for people who have already read the book and want to go back and quickly look up a specific section that they remember, perhaps an anecdote or a mention of a name. It’s useful for people browsing in a book shop who can flick to the end and get a feel for the contents and for whether their specific interest is mentioned before making the decision to buy your book.
So what type of work needs an index? There are some types of non-fiction where to have no index would do the reader a huge disservice. For instructional books and manuals or those containing a lot of factual information such as guidebooks an index is essential. The same is true of any work that will be used for academic study such as histories, biographies or textbooks. For memoirs or similar personal accounts that have more story-like qualities then it’s worth thinking about the types of readers you will have or want to have. An index will always add value to your work no question about that, but you may feel that your book will be read more as a work of fiction or entertainment than used as an information source, if this is the case then you (or your publisher) might make the call that an index isn’t needed. This decision will change from author to author and from book to book depending on your subject matter. If however you are intending to communicate a lot of information, even if this information is drawn from personal experience (e.g. about the architecture of the buildings in the town you live in) then a good index is a gift to the reader who has found your work because of the subject matter.

Some publishers will require you to have your work indexed and may contact an indexer on your behalf, others will ask the author to provide the index meaning you can either do it yourself or get someone to do it for you.

If you do need to index your book and you decide to do it yourself there are pros and cons. Here’s a post which you might find helpful: https://tanyaizzard.co.uk/2019/04/14/indexing-your-first-monograph-a-guide-for-phd-students-and-early-career-researchers/

However if, once you’ve finished writing your book, you don’t want to look at it again (or you just want a rest!) then see if you can find someone to do it for you. Society of Indexers has a directory: https://www.indexers.org.uk/find-an-indexer/directory/

Any questions do ask!