The First Shall Be Last

Here is my advice to new indexers: save the first chapter to index last. Why do I say that? Well, I index a lot of multi-authored books, although the same principle may well apply to books by a solo author. The first chapter, which typically serves as an introduction to the book, gives an overview and touches on the themes of the coming chapters. If you are indexing from it as soon as you start the project, then you are not really sure which terms give the right phrasing or the main focus of what is about to come. Sometimes a different person writes the introduction and goes off on a tangent giving his/her own analysis of the field. This material can then be over indexed since you don't know it is not going to come up again as you index.

If, on the other hand, you treat the introduction the same way that you treat a conclusion, then you can save yourself a lot of extra work and frustration. Typically I skim the first chapter but don't bother to make entries. Then I start with chapter 2 and input what I call "first-pass" indexing. This works for books that chunk their material with subheads and use subheads that offer substantive information. So I go through very fast and build a framework of the index by making these entries. I don't read paragraph by paragraph at this point although sometimes I will skim an introductory paragraph for the chapter to make sure that I understand the topic.

For example, let's look at a book I did recently on immigration issues. Chapter 7 is entitled "The Quest for AgJobs." Here is how the breakdowns in the chapter look:

IRCA AND H-2A – pages 73-77
THE AgJOBS COMPROMISE – pages 77-80
WHAT NEXT FOR AGJOBS? – pages 80-81
LEGALIZATION PROPOSALS – pages 81-85
AgJOBS AND IMMIGRATION REFORM IN CONTEXT – pages 85-86

For my first pass indexing, I will first create all the entries under one heading. I will not stop to flip them or double-post them until I have them all under the one heading; this will save me time and is the fastest way to make entries in the software I use. So I will write:

Agricultural workers
    IRCA and, 73-77
    H2-A visas and, 73-77
    compromise over, 77-80
    future trends for, 80-81
    legalization proposals for, 81-85
    immigration reform and, 85-86

After I make the entries, the software puts them into the proper alphabetical order (I have just shown here how I follow the order in which they appear in the chapter). Then I use a feature in the indexing software that allows me to duplicate that entire heading and this time, I go through and decide what to double-post by manipulating the duplicate entries.

From the example above, I now create the following entries:

IRCA
(or if I know what the acronym stands for – Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) – I would make that the heading)
    agricultural workers and, 73-77

H2-A visas
    agricultural workers and, 73-77

Compromises
    agricultural workers and, 77-80 (I may decide that this is not a good heading later and edit it out but for now I would put it in to see what develops)

Legalization
    agricultural workers and, 81-85

Immigration reform
    agricultural workers and, 85-86

I continue through the book like this, indexing a chapter and then double-posting the entries that I can. When I have finished, I have created a framework for the index, and I have a picture of the scope of the book and the main topics.

Now I can make the entries for the first chapter because I know when it is discussing a main topic. For example, page 5 of the first chapter discusses "IRCA legalized 1.2 million foreign farmworkers," and I know that all I have to do is go to the IRCA heading and add 5, to the line there about agricultural workers. Likewise I will go to the agricultural workers main head and add 5, to the subheading IRCA and there. If I had not created the framework, I would not know just how significant this statement was in terms of the rest of the book. I may or may not have picked it up as an index entry and I may have wasted time on phrasing that was not necessary. Here it is very quick to just add a page number.

By the way, I also create cross-references as soon as they occur to me. So at the time I make the heading Agricultural workers, I would have put in:

Farmworkers. *See* Agricultural workers

And likewise I would make the cross-reference from IRCA to the spelled-out form. Sometimes though I will confess that I find it quicker to create the entire acronym cross-referencing at the end after I have made all the entries. That way I know which ones to double-post since they only have one page number and which ones to cross-reference since they have so many page numbers and/or subentries. Otherwise when I run the cross-reference check, I find that I have to change cross-references to double-posts since

they lack sufficient information to merit the cross-reference treatment. This extra work can be avoided by holding off on acronym cross-referencing until the book is done.

Once you make this approach your routine, you won't forget to go back to index chapter 1. There is that danger, so be sure to put your file into page order before submitting it to make sure you have made entries for all the pages from one through the end. It is good to have a checklist of final procedures and follow them slavishly to avoid embarrassing mistakes. I find that there is no short-cut for doing final checks! They all have to be done every time.

It is interesting when you think about indexing the first chapter last to remember how often authors draft an introduction only to find that when they finish the book, they have covered totally different ground than they expected. They too often revisit the first chapter last to make needed revisions. They are in fact editing chapter 1 to match the book just like indexers who are making these entries last for the very same reason!