Indexing A to Zafran

Hitting the High Notes

I dream of a time when I no longer have to say, "The thing in the back of the book" or "Yes, I read all of it" or "No, computers do not create indexes, humans do." How do I think that will happen? Part of the dream is my taking a roadtrip where I stop in people's homes and workplaces and explain to them how indexes work and why they want to use them. In the dream, I am in a cozy kitchen, seated at the table, and a family is gathered around me with looks of awe and gratitude on their faces. Yes, it is a dream!

So I have to take it down a few notches: I have to settle for the education that I can do through the index itself. It means the user has found the index and wants to use it. Perhaps perplexed by the index structure or some abbreviation in the index, the user turns to the front of the index for guidance. And there on high, I have a note with instructions, right at the top of the index! Granted this is a small step in the realm of user education, but it does advance our cause to provide whatever assistance we can. These notes also make me feel extra-helpful – indexing is a "helping" profession (maybe not as helping as nursing, but in its own way an index helps people) and when I add this information, I provide some extra guidance and direction, making the experience of using the index more successful overall.

The notes address such matters as:

- how the index works – for example, its order;
- the scope of the indexing – for example, ignoring certain parts of the material; or
- the meaning of conventions used within the index—for example, prefixes on locators.

You hear it said that "no one reads the notes at the front of the index." Nonsense, I say! If you see some symbol like an asterisk or some entries in bold in the index, don't you flip around trying to find out why? You look at the bottom of the page for a footer or to the top of the page for a header, and if nothing there helps you, then the next obvious place is to go back to the start and see if any explanatory text appears there.

Many clients ask for these notes, so they believe they fulfill a purpose. In the "olden days" I remember when a legend would run at the bottom of every page (or on every odd page) to explain special notations. But you rarely see publishers today offer that level of helpfulness; instead publishers assume the user will consult the first page to find the key to special usages. This article will discuss various types of introductory notes and give examples of phrasing.

1/ *To explain abbreviations used with page numbers.*

When the index contains entry locators referring to boxes, figures, maps, tables, etc., best practice demands an explanation of the abbreviations used for these features. The typical style that I use for this note is:

Boxes, figures, maps, notes, and tables are indicated by b, f, m, n, and t following page numbers.

I frequently see the same information phrased in these styles:

Boxes, figures, maps, notes, and tables are indicated by b, f, m, n, and t respectively.

The letters e, f, and t after page numbers refer to exhibits, figures, and tables.

b, f, n, and t denote box, figure, note, and table.

Customize these sentences so they contain only the ones needed (for example, if the particular book does not have boxes, remove that from the list).

I do not favor the style of the last one in the list above as the index had the sentence start with a lower-case letter to match the indexing style. Then the indexer put a period at the end of the sentence, but it appears as if the sentence has incorrect grammar by not starting with a capital letter – I would have not removed the period and centered the information so it becomes a centered-heading and is not meant as a sentence.

Some people like to put the letters in quotation marks, but I find that makes the sentence too ornate and elongated for my tastes; moreover, it is a lot of fussy typing to get all those quotation marks in there. It would look like this:

Boxes, figures, maps, notes, and tables are indicated by "b," "f," "m," "n," and "t" following page numbers.

In illustrated publications, italicization of page numbers indicates the page number where the picture is found. Art catalogs can employ an even more complicated system as they want to identify which artworks appear in the exhibit for which they have been published as the companion book from the artworks that are included for discussion purposes only. Here is a note that was used in one such instance:

Page numbers in bold italics indicate the exhibit paintings. Page numbers in italics indicate other illustrations and photographs. Paintings, photographs, books, poems, and plays are listed under artist, photographer, or author.

(This note offers information not just about the page number conventions but also explains why users will not find the artworks scattered throughout the index by title but instead grouped under the artist's name (and likewise for literary works and photographs). This information allows the indexer to go with one posting per title and helps keep the size of the index manageable.)

2/ To explain numbering of index locators.

Back of the book indexes generally refer to page numbers, and that convention is so widely employed and understood requiring no extra explanation. Some treatises, particularly in the legal field, use instead section numbers which may appear in a scheme like 3.01[A][1] or 3:I.A.1. The section number indicates the chapter which in the example is Chapter 3, and within that chapter it is section 3.01 or section I. This section contains subsections A, B, C, etc. and each subsection contains sub-subsections 1, 2, 3, etc. Indexes that refer to section numbers usually have a note at the top which reads like this:

References are to section numbers.

Some of the legal publishers for whom I work want a more amplified note like this:

References are to chapter and section numbers (e.g., 3.01[A][1] refers to section 01[A][1] in Chapter 3).

References are to chapter and section numbers (e.g., 3:I.A.1 refers to section I.A.1 in Chapter 3).

I often work on a series of publications that employ a question-and-answer format. In this instance the publisher opts to have the question number as the locator. Each question has a unique ID that consists of its chapter number and its question number: 4.2 (meaning Chapter 4, question 2). At the top of the index the publisher has me provide this note language:

References are to question numbers.

Indexes may cover entries in multiple volumes, and sometimes each volume starts over from page 1. That requires the indexer to construct a unique locator; for example, III:152 to refer to volume III, page 152. Here the indexer needs to supply a note that explains this approach:

References are to volume and page numbers (e.g., volumes are indicated by roman numerals followed by page numbers).

Cumulative indexes encompass multiple volumes or issues spanning a range of years. This frequently happens in magazine or newspaper indexing when the publisher wants a master index to previously published material. They may not have numbered the issues, or they may have started the page numbering over again for each year. For instance, I was hired to index a 20-year run of a magazine that published four issues a year: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Every year it had these same four designations, and every year the page numbers started over with page 1 in the Winter issue and then numbered continuously for the year until the last page would appear in Fall. For the cumulative index I created a locator that gave the page number, season, and year. It looked like this: 2003: 134 (Spring). I wanted to start with the year not the season, so that multiple locators would sort like this: 2001: 15 (Winter); 2003: 134 (Spring); 2005: 18, 57-58 (Winter). It seemed logical that a user would want to start with the year and since within that year the page numbers ran consecutively that would follow as the next element. The season seems extraneous as the year and page number form a unique locator, but giving the season when there are 4 issues makes it a bit quicker to deal with physical magazines if the user is standing in front of the shelf trying to pick out the right issue. For

electronic purposes the year and page number is unique and makes a complete link. Although this system may seem obvious, I still put a note at the top of the index to explain the elements of the locators.

References are to year and page numbers as well as to the season of the issue.

3/ To explain alphabetical order.

Some indexes are so short and simple that the listing of entries remains the same no matter whether letter-by-letter or word-by-word order is applied. In those instances the indexer does not need to designate which approach she used. The majority of indexes that I do though have thousands of entries for large complex books so I put a note at the top to explain the alphabetization. I pick an example that illustrates the order that may confuse users and include that as well.

Alphabetization is letter-by-letter (e.g., "Civilian organizations" precedes "Civil service").

The main headings that I choose to illustrate the order I put in quotation marks to indicate they actually came from the index and are not generic examples I made up.

In indexes that contain the names of Arab individuals, I provide a special note to explain how to find them. The rule is to ignore el- and al- which often appear as prefixes in such names. On the other hand, I keep al-Qaeda and al-Jazeera in the A's since most Americans expect to find them there. The note I have created gives very specific information on names of people to distinguish their treatment from organizational names.

Surnames starting with al- or el- are alphabetized by the subsequent part of the name.

Again, it is possible to include an example with an e.g. parenthetical to elucidate the point.

4/ To explain abbreviations within the index.

Sometimes the indexer needs to use an abbreviation or acronym in the index. This situation commonly happens when indexing biographies where so many entries require the main figure's name. Since a biography includes the relatives of the main character, the last name does not distinguish who is meant. Yet it will take up a lot of room to keep repeating the full name of the person so indexers use the initials to indicate him. Instead of saying Michael Jackson, the indexer substitutes MJ. Then at the top of the index the note reads:

MJ in the index refers to Michael Jackson.

Sometimes an unusual book may require a legend at the top to explain a set of abbreviations that will occur throughout the index. When I take this approach, I ask the editors or authors for

their permission; that way I don't find out after I turn in the index that they don't like it and want it reversed. So at the top I provide a small key like this:

The following acronyms are used in the index:

ERISA – Employee Retirement Income Security Act   *FMLA – Family Medical Leave Act*
PPA – Pension Protection Act   *RRA – Railroad Retirement Act*

5/ To explain the scope of the index.

Sometimes a decision may be made by the publisher to exclude certain information from the index. In the area of law, a common publishing practice is to issue a supplement to a master edition to update the information in the earlier publication. These supplements typically follow an annual schedule and cumulate over time until they become so large that the publisher deems it time for a new edition. Within the supplements, some sections of the text have nonsubstantive changes for the index (e.g., a date change, an addition of a court cite, a change to an internal textual cross-reference) so the supplement index excludes them. The index picks up only those sections in the supplement that have actual textual changes that require new or modified entries for the index. At the top of the index a notice appears to clarify this approach:

This index includes references to sections that have been substantively revised or added new in the Supplement. Sections modified for nonsubstantive changes are not included.

I have just finished indexing a book where the first 142 pages contained overview essays and the publisher chose not to have that part indexed. The index covers the subsequent 430 pages of abstracts of court cases. This index will have a note at the top to indicate its scope:

The index covers only the case abstracts which start on page 143.

I consider these notes essential as otherwise users may consider the index as incomplete or inaccurate. The resulting confusion can give the field of indexing a bad reputation when users experience frustration; they normally would expect the index to incorporate the total book, so a publisher decision to exclude material from the index needs to be made clear.

6/ To explain multiple indexes.

Some projects require more than one index. One time I indexed 105 years of magazines for the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a huge undertaking, with over 250,000 entries in 13 separate indexes. The indexes required three individual bound volumes. At the front of each volume, a lengthy note explained the indexes in that volume and referred also to the other indexes in the other volumes.

Few projects reach such heights and require pages of explanation. But it is not uncommon for a legal treatise to have a separate table of cases, table of laws, and table of authorities as well as

an index. That may necessitate a note at a main heading within the index for an authority like this:

Restatements of Law. See separate Table of Authorities

While I do not place this note at the very top of the index, it helps users to know that this information has not been omitted but in fact, has a detailed grouping elsewhere.

Sometimes I will in the subject index deal with the Restatement of Law in terms of subject matter, while in the Table of Authorities I deal with it in terms of citation. In other words the subject index entries look like this:

Restatement (Second) of Torts
>   defamation, 326
>   invasion of privacy, 123
>   negligence, 233

And the corresponding Table of Authorities entries look like this:

Restatement (Second) of Torts
§ 282 . . . 292
§ 525 . . . 202

Then in the subject index I often add a note to point users to the second type of coverage in the Table of Authorities:

Restatement (Second) of Torts
>   *Note: For treatment by Restatement section number, see the separate Table of Authorities.*
>   defamation, 326
>   invasion of privacy, 123
>   negligence, 233

While my examples come from the field of law, this type of note can be applied to books in other areas that require specialized separate indexes.

There are other occasions when I like to use internal notes in the index, and I will save that discussion for a future column. As you can see if you have made it this far, I had quite a lot to say on the topic of notes on high and how helpful they can be. The indexer not only can make the index work more successfully for users by these explanations but can demonstrate the added value that the index brings to the text.

Enid L. Zafran
© March 2012